

2018 09 23 – Kindness

Mark 12:28-34
Proverbs 21:21

Today I'm going to begin with a brief story that I found on the Internet this week.

It was written by a young American man named Houston Kraft. He wrote:

About 6 years ago, I was on a plane next to a woman who was relentlessly energetic and fidgety. I was tired and wanted to take a nap. But before I could go into "ignore mode," she tapped me on the shoulder to introduce herself.

"Hi, my name is Helga!"

We got to talking and eventually it came up that I had started an organization in high school called R.A.K.E. (Random Acts of Kindness, Etc.). As I described what we did, Helga got very serious and told me that she thought "there was nothing more important in the world than Kindness." I was curious why she was so passionate and, as the plane took off, she dove into a story about the last time she had flown; it was 3 years past and she was en route to Arizona because she had gotten sudden news her Dad's health was on the decline. Just as the plane was about to depart to Phoenix, her father's physician called to inform her that her dad had rather suddenly passed away. For the 3 hour plane ride, she sat in stunned silence surrounded by strangers.

When she arrived at the airport in Arizona, she walked to the nearest wall, sat down, and cried.

And here is the part I'll never forget about Helga's story. For 2 hours she sat and wept while thousands walked to and fro in the airport. Helga looked at me and said, "Houston, not a single person stopped and asked if I was okay that day. Not one person. It was that day that I realized how much we need each other. It was that day I realized that Kindness Isn't Normal." <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/kindness-stories/4-raktivist-houston>

So why didn't anyone stop to offer help to Helga that day? What was going through each person's mind as he or she walked by this woman crying in an airport? If you were one of those people walking by, what would have kept you from stopping? *(wait for responses: too self-absorbed and didn't notice, noticed but didn't have the time to stop, noticed but didn't think it was their business to stop, noticed but assumed someone would stop, noticed but felt overwhelmed by her pain and didn't know what to do...)* There are lots of reasons why Helga got the impression that "Kindness isn't Normal."

Our world is full of pain and suffering and it is easy to get overwhelmed by all the stories that we hear on the news or read on our mobile devices. Our lives are crazy busy and it's easy to become so focussed on ourselves and our families that it's hard to look beyond our own front door. We are told over and over not to trust the alien, or the stranger, so it's easy to allow our fears to control our actions. We know there are others in the world who are better at offering

support than we are, so it's easy to assume that someone else will be there to help. There are lots of reasons why Helga got the impression that "Kindness isn't Normal."

Last year, the Psychology Today magazine published an article called "The Importance of Kindness" and it began with following words:

Kindness is defined as the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. Affection, gentleness, warmth, concern, and care are words that are associated with kindness. While kindness has a connotation of meaning someone is naive or weak, that is not the case. Being kind often requires courage and strength. Kindness is an interpersonal skill.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/pieces-mind/201712/the-importance-kindness>

I would add to that definition that kindness is a gift from God. It is one of the Fruits of the Spirit that each of us has been given. And it is a skill, like any other, that can be improved with practice.

One of the ways that we show kindness is by opening our eyes to the needs of those around us and then taking action that will help. But the first part of any act of kindness is opening our eyes. This is what Linnea Good wrote about in the hymn that we sang during today's Community Learning Time:

Took a step outside of my walking
Stepped inside another's shoes

On her website, Linnea explains the story behind this song, she writes:

Many years ago, I was invited by the World Council of Churches Youth Sub-Committee to attend an event in Cyprus and Egypt. . . We sat in the board room on the upper floor of a hotel for days of committee meetings in heat that was in the thirties - talking, praying, analysing. We sipped water non-stop.

Whenever there was a moment for a break, I would go to the window and stare out across the tops of the buildings of Cairo. . . Immediately across from our board room was a building under construction. Concrete flooring had begun, and a long 2x8 board had been leaned like a ramp against it to permit construction workers to walk up it, each with a stack of 4 bricks on his head. Walls were being built at a painstaking speed. . . What would have taken one afternoon with cranes and concrete mixers would take months.

<https://www.linneagood.com/stories-behind-songs>

I took a step outside of my walking.

Found within a beat that we share

Linnea's eyes were opened to what was happening around her. She recognized the stark contrast between her own country and the one she was visiting. And, at the same time, she saw the humanity of the people outside her window. She appreciated the superhuman effort of the workers across the street and, in response, wrote a song that would help us open our eyes as well.

Walked with you the length of a lifetime

And made of life a living prayer

Of course, opening our eyes is just the first step. True kindness also requires action. That action can take many forms including acts of charity, pastoral care, comfort and support. When we are kind to others, when we follow the teachings of Jesus and show our love for our neighbours, when we support the incredible work of the United Church's Mission & Service Fund, then our lives become "a living prayer."

In Proverbs we read, "Those who seek out virtue and kindness will gain life, prosperity and honour as well." We don't commit acts of kindness expecting anything in return, it's just a bonus that being kind makes us healthier and happier. Scientists tell us that engaging in acts of kindness reduces pain, stress, anxiety, depression and even lowers our blood pressure. One study states that volunteering at two or more organizations has more positive impact on a person's health than working out four times a week or even going to church. Being kind can make us happier and help us live longer.

<https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/the-science-of-kindness>

And in order to be kind to others, we must also be kind to ourselves. As Jesus said, "Love your neighbour as yourself." If we ignore our own needs then it is impossible for us to have the ability to show kindness to others. In the next few hours and days and weeks I invite you to improve your lives and the lives of those around you as you reach out and try a little kindness