

Kindness Starts Here

Sermon 48 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 2, 2020

Titus 3: 1-9

It is widely believed that there are 7.7 billion people living on our planet today. Of those 7.7 billion people, 0.2% identify as Jewish, 15.1% as Hindu, 24.1% as Muslim, and 31.2% identify as Christianⁱ. It is also widely understood that all major religions hold kindness as a central focus and spiritual discipline. In Hindu sacred texts we read: “One should not behave toward others in a way that is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish nature.” (Mahabharata, anusasana Parva 113.8). In the Jewish Bible we read these words from Leviticus (19:18): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This sentiment is underscored by Rabbi Hillel who writes in the Talmud, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a). In Islamic texts we read: “Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” (Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 13).ⁱⁱ

In our own tradition, Christianity, we find numerous examples of scripture calling us to practice kindness. In the story of Ruth, Jesus’ own ancestors are saved by acts of *hesed* which translates to loving-kindness. In our prophetic texts, Micah (6:8) reminds us that God requires us to, “do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” The Gospels tell the story of Jesus who brought kindness into every human interaction. Then later in the New Testament epistles, we see the idea of kindness emerge as a fruit of the Spirit - an outward sign of the Holy Spirit’s work within us.

So, if the world is full of 7.7 billion people, and if 70.6% (which is a solid majority) of those people identify as Jewish, Hindu, Muslim or Christian... we might expect that people – generally speaking – would be kind to one another.

And yet if the nightly news or our social media feeds are any indication, we seem to be heading in quite the opposite direction.

Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Titus. Titus is one of three pastoral epistles in the New Testament and they’re all found side by side. 1 & 2 Timothy, then Titus. These books differ from some of the other letters included in our Bibles because they are not written to entire congregations, like the letter to the Corinthians. These three are personal letters, written to Timothy and Titus who have been taught by Paul and who have been entrusted with the pastoral leadership of the church.

All three are written under Paul’s name. Although his authorship is questioned by some biblical scholars, whether or not Paul actually wrote the book doesn’t really matter for our purposes today.

As we read these ancient words, we eavesdrop into a conversation between two leaders in the ancient church. We become privy to their concerns about growing divisions within the fellowship and we see some themes unfolding here that appear elsewhere in the New Testament Gospels.

The letter to Titus comes as the early church is entering its third generation and facing significant challenges. Whereas the first generation of Christians faced persecution from the outside, from Rome, the most serious threats to the unity of the church now seem to have moved inside. There were theological debates about salvation with some arguing it was available only to an elite few who understood a spiritual knowledge that they held over and above everyone else. There was disagreement about resurrection. There were competing ideas about the church's top priorities – whether they should be more concerned with the poor and marginalized or if their first priority should focus on individual spirituality. There remained traditionalists among them who held fast to the old rules about circumcision and religious purity. As Timothy and Titus cared for and led their congregations, these issues (and many more) threatened the unity of their communities and had begun to jeopardize the entire future of the church.

We who remain in the church today can certainly relate to how Titus must have felt as he looked out on a broken and splintering church. Despite our best intentions, our own churches face threats of quarrel and controversy. Baptists have been plagued with this throughout our history. We divided over slavery, segregation and racism. We divided over women. We remain divided over issues of sexuality and politics and biblical interpretation. And worse, in times of ideological division, we let our ideas, our interpretations, our opinions distract us from what brought us together in the first place.

As he faces a splintering congregation, Titus reads this wise reminder:

For we were once foolish... But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (3:3-5a)

In the midst of our human foolishness, God intervenes with goodness and loving kindness through the person of Jesus. This is the heart of the Christian message, and the source of our unity.

When we decide that we will be followers of Christ, we receive God's gifts of goodness and loving-kindness, and in so doing, we experience a holistic transformation. When we decide to become disciples of Jesus we covenant to put aside our old ways of dividing up the world into categories of "us" and "them." We put aside the notion that some are "insiders" while others are "outsiders." We put aside the quarrels and senseless divisions of our past, claiming unity in the mercy of God that turns us into not a better version of who we used to be, but a new creation altogether. In Christ, we are transformed, from the

inside out. And in that transformation, we allow the same goodness, and mercy, and kindness to flow freely outward from our hearts into the world, in hopes that our whole world might also be transformed from isolation and prejudice into the goodness and loving-kindness we find in our Savior and our God.

You've heard the stories of CBF Field Personnel who do work alongside the people of Togo, a small country in West Africa. They do this work as an outpouring of God's loving-kindness that can't help but bubble over into the communities to which they are called. Maybe you don't feel called to travel abroad. Maybe you're asking yourself how you can infuse the world with kindness, right here? Let me tell you a story I heard this week that might help spark some kindness creativity.

In 2015, a Pennsylvania woman named Cheryl Rice received a card from a co-worker, as encouragement for a project she was working on. Her colleague placed the card in her hand and walked away before Cheryl had a chance to look at it.

Weeks later she was in line at a grocery store when she couldn't help but hear the woman in front of her explain to the cashier that she and her family were going through some really hard times. Her husband had lost his job and finances were tight. Cheryl felt badly for the woman but didn't know what to do. Should she buy her groceries? Should she ask for her husband's resume? How else could she help?

Not knowing how the woman in front of her might respond... not really knowing what she could do, Cheryl didn't do anything.

A minute or two later when Cheryl was walking to her car she realized that the woman from the checkout line was putting her buggee away near where she had parked. Immediately Cheryl thought of the card her co-worker had given to her, and she remembered she still had it in her car. So, she ran to get it and walked over to the stranger saying, "I couldn't help overhearing what you said to the cashier. It sounds like you're going through a really hard time right now. I'm so sorry. I'd like to give you something."

The stranger read the words on the card and soon began to cry, saying, "You have no idea how much this means to me."

Cheryl was surprised by the woman's response and again, didn't really know how to respond except by saying, "Oh my, would it be OK for me to give you a hug?"

The two strangers embraced in that parking lot before returning to their cars, connected by the experience of two words shared in an expression of loving-kindness.

The words: "You Matter."

Because of that encounter, Cheryl decided that others might benefit from the same simple expression of kindness that she had now given and received. In 2016 she launched something called a You Matter Marathon. She's quick to say it's the best kind of marathon because there's no running involved! It's basically 30 cards that simply say "you matter" given away to everyone who signs up to participate in the marathon. You Matter marathoners then look for opportunities to share the cards with people around them... people who need to hear those grace-filled words. "You Matter."

The You Matter marathon now has nearly 30,000 participants representing all 50 states and nearly 80 countries around the world. All because Cheryl Rice received the kindness of her colleague and decided that it wouldn't end with her.ⁱⁱⁱ

Each and every day we have so many opportunities to display kindness to those we encounter. Whether we are surrounded by family, in offices with our colleagues, in the gym, in the classroom, driving on the beltline, or engaging online – we have a chance to give and receive kindness.

Just as there will be opportunities for us to draw near to one another in kindness, there will also be many opportunities for us to isolate ourselves from one another. There will be public rhetoric that seeks to create fear about our neighbors, that dehumanizes people who look and think and feel differently than we do, that demoralizes people who are fighting against incredible economic and social challenges. There will be headlines that mislead us and enflame our tempers, pitting one side against the other. This year, there will be bullying in our schools and in our workplaces. There will be financial stress and family stress. There will be unpredictable encounters with strangers, and familiar encounters with those we love most. These things we know for sure.

Each one provides us with a choice about how we will act.

Today we, like the people in Titus' church in Crete, are going back to the basics... back before there were disagreements about doctrine, back before there was division around theological ideas, back to the very moment where it all began, the moment wherein God took on human form in an act of loving-kindness, so that we might come and see and follow.

This year at Greystone, we are embarking on a year of kindness. A year spent exploring kindness as a spiritual practice, as our daily intention, and as our Christian witness to ourselves, to one another, and to our neighbors – each and every one. Each month we will look for kindness in some very specific areas. We will explore kindness online and in our families, kindness in our schools and with our earth, kindness in our work and in our rest, kindness in our politics and kindness across lines of difference.

As we focus on kindness, we will recognize that we are called not only to receive, but also to share the light and the love of Christ, our example of loving-kindness live and in

the flesh. We are called not only to receive that gift, but to share it in every corner of our hearts and in every corner of our world.

This is our hope and our prayer.

May it be so.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

ⁱⁱ References from Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam found on <https://www.feedkindness.com/resources/mindful-religion-coexistence/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Story first heard on the Kindness Podcast, Season 3, Episode 80. This story is also shared online at <https://youmattermarathon.com> (first retrieved Feb. 1, 2020). For more information on Cheryl Rice visit <http://cherylricelership.com> .