

THE POWER OF KINDNESS

Romans 12: 9-18; Luke 7: 36-50

Brian Goldman is an emergency room doctor at Mount Sinai hospital here in Toronto. Besides hosting a CBC radio show, he has recently written a book, entitled: “The Power of Kindness: How Empathy is Essential in Everyday Life.” He writes about how the biggest single issue between patients and their doctors is not medical incompetence. An even greater issue for patients is a lack of communication and caring. When a patient calls a doctor incompetent, the doctor can usually brush it off. But when they call a doctor unkind, that’s different.

This hit home one day, for Goldman, some years ago. An elderly woman was admitted to the emergency department. She was suffering the advanced stages of a degenerative disease and her family brought her in because they could no longer care for her at home. After examining her, Goldman couldn’t see any compelling reason to admit her. The woman had been looked after well. She was thin, but well-nourished on a pureed diet. She had no acute medical issues that required immediate admission to hospital. She was not de-hydrated, she didn’t have pneumonia and she didn’t have a fever. Still, the family members were at the end of their rope and at the time, Goldman could not see that. He simply experienced them as pushy and demanding.

Eventually, Goldman agreed to have her admitted, but he did so in a begrudging way, even snapping at a family member when he asked one too many times about a referral. The internist on call followed through on the admission and Goldman went on to see other patients, relieved to be done with the situation. A few weeks later, the woman passed away.

A few months later, the woman’s husband wrote a letter to Goldman, accusing him flat out of being unkind to the man and his family. He asked Goldman to meet with the family because he wanted to see if, in his words, “a kind soul lurked under that abrupt demeanour.” Wow! Pretty confronting isn’t it?

So what did Goldman do? He considered meeting the family with his advisor. Even though his competence was not in question, Goldman was troubled. He ended up attending the meeting alone. It was not an easy session. The husband came with all their adult children along with their spouses. Each took a turn speaking, giving Goldman a vivid picture of a vibrant and accomplished woman, a loving partner and a devoted mother and grandmother. Goldman was devastated. How could he respond?

Before I continue with this story, let me add another one. This is also a story about a doctor – not a medical doctor, but a doctor of theology. His name: Martin Luther. Luther is credited with being the father of the Protestant Reformation, a revolution in the late medieval church of the 1500s that created a break with the church. They were called Protestant because they protested corruption and abuse in the church. They protested a flawed proclamation of the gospel. They called for a renewal of the church based on a more authentic retrieval of the bible and the New Testament vision of the church. The Lutheran church is named after Luther. In Switzerland they were called Reformed Churches. Within a generation in Scotland, they were called Presbyterian. That's where we come from.

Now, back to Luther. Luther was a doctor who diagnosed not ailments of the body, but ailments of the soul. And such diagnosis was not just something he did for spiritual patients. It was much more personal for Luther. In order to be a good doctor of the soul, he had to recognize himself as a patient first. The accusation of being unkind, of lacking sufficient love, was not something others accused Luther of. For all intents and purposes, Luther was an exemplary human being and an exemplary teacher of the church. No. Luther's biggest struggle was within himself. Luther lived in a world, a pre-modern world, a world where people believed God, the devil, angels and spirits were all around. God could see all, even the deepest secrets and especially, the deepest sins. Luther felt that he could never satisfy God's standards, that he was just not good enough, that he lacked the kind of love and devotion God required.

This was also a world where heaven and hell were believed in vividly. Life was relatively short and often hard for most people. What happened to you after you died was even more important than what happened to you while still in this world. You could live for 40-60 years here and now, but after you died, that was forever. So, satisfying God's demands and making it to heaven was of major importance.

The church guaranteed to offer the answers if you were dependent enough and if you paid enough. Luther just couldn't buy this formula of assurance. Unless he felt at peace within, unless he felt real peace in the depths of his conscience, he could not find satisfaction. And so, he was tormented. As Goldman was devastated by the accusation of unkindness from the family of his patient, as he was tormented by his having failed as a doctor according to a higher standard of love, so, too, Luther felt tormented with a spotty conscience and a failure to love God and neighbour as God demanded and people deserved.

So how did Luther respond? Before I continue the story of Luther and Goldman, let's dig into this theme through our scriptures. Our reading from Romans lays it all out plainly: *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute*

to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. "Wow! Sounds wonderful. Please raise your hand if you've never failed in any of this even a little... I thought so. So how do we respond?"

Let's look at one more story in order to frame that of Goldman and Luther, the story in our gospel reading. There are three characters in this story. There is a Pharisee. A Pharisee is an important religious official, a leader of his community, highly respected in terms of his moral character, integrity and uprightness. Then there is a woman. She is called a sinner. That means she has done something or lived a certain way that has brought shame on her. She is morally flawed and compromised according to the standards of that society. She is even shunned in certain quarters and treated with contempt.

Then there is Jesus. The Pharisee has invited Jesus to his house for a nice meal. He wants to size Jesus up and he wants to make an impression so that Jesus recognizes the kind of man the Pharisee is. Jesus needs to know who to respect. But this high society dinner is disrupted by the woman. She has a need to find Jesus and she throws all caution to the wind. She doesn't care how badly people will react to her wild and powerful emotions. She doesn't care that she hasn't been invited. She would never be invited to that kind of dinner with those kinds of people anyway. She's a fallen woman. They love God and the right kinds of neighbours, as long as they live according to the same strict standards of behaviour.

But here's the thing. The woman responds to Jesus in a way the Pharisee could never respond. The woman has been shown total love by Jesus. Regardless of what she has done or failed to do, Jesus embraces her as an infinitely precious child of God. And she? She is so full of gratitude she weeps and she kisses Jesus' feet, pouring ointment on them and bathing them with her tears. It may be crazy. It may be wildly extravagant. But it is a heartfelt, powerful expression of gratitude for love shown to her.

And how does the Pharisee respond to all this? He's offended, appalled, disgusted. This woman should not be in his house. He doesn't associate with such people. And Jesus should know better if he is the kind of man to impress truly upright people. But here's the thing. The woman carries shame while the Pharisee throws out blame. The woman's chains of shame are broken by love, whereas the Pharisee's chains of blame only get thicker with more self-righteous blame. The woman is full of gratitude and expresses it extravagantly. The Pharisee has no need to be grateful, but rather feels offended. What's the difference?

Love is the difference. The woman recognizes her need for love, she experiences it and receives it and it transforms her shame into gratitude. The Pharisee blames and condemns

and takes offence. And because he's closed to love, his blaming, condemning and taking offence grows and grows. But here's the catch. To break the chains you have to recognize you need love just like everyone else. You're flawed and broken just like anyone else. Whether it's more or less than your neighbour, everyone fails by someone else's standards and certainly by God's. Without love, we're finished. Can we absorb this kind of truth and live out of it?

Now, back to Luther and Goldman. Both are confronted by their inadequacy in loving God and their neighbour adequately. Luther carries a tormented conscience. Goldman carries the shame of being confronted by the family of a patient. They could easily remain stuck in their shame. They could easily fall into the blame game, blaming God or their neighbour for being difficult or impossible or flawed and so their poor treatment is justified and deserved. In Luther's case, he expresses anger at God for setting up the kind of moral standard no sincere human being can ever meet adequately.

But then something happens. Just like the woman encounters the powerful, transforming love of God in Jesus, so too, Luther and Goldman encounter the love of God. How does it happen? For Luther, it happens while he reads and rereads his bible. He discovers it in simple words that he just couldn't understand before: I am loved as I am, as a human being, even outside and before I have done anything to earn or deserve it. The biblical word for this is grace. Grace means gift. Love is a gift. It can never be earned and if it is earned it is a flawed kind of love. True love reaches deep down into us beyond anything we can ever do for it. And when we absorb it, whatever shame, blame or denial is in us just falls away. We are filled with gratitude and we develop a passion to love in return. This is the spiritual heart of the Protestant Reformation: We are saved by grace through faith. Faith means trust. We trust this grace, we rely on it and absorb it. We believe it. And so our life begins to be shaped by this kind of grace love. As we receive grace love we want to share it. Nothing makes us happier anymore.

And what about Goldman? He could have felt shame, the kind of shame that shuts you down and makes you go inside and hide. He could have deflected the criticism by blaming – blaming the family, blaming the system, blaming the overload and exhaustion of having to cover so many bases as an emergency room doctor. And yet, after the family finished talking, Goldman found himself crying. But the family were crying too. Rather than criticism, they were expressing love and tenderness toward Goldman. They cared that he understood. Such love and tenderness, Goldman claims, slowed him down long enough to listen. And over time, such an experience was a catalyst for Goldman changing many things within himself as a doctor and as a human being.

The power of kindness, the gift of love called grace, the kind of love that can break through our hard-heartedness, our shame, our blame, our excuses, justifications and denials. That's

the kind of encounter faith in God requires. That kind of love is what neighbours need from us. That kind of gift is what our world needs more than ever. “Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’” May we find fresh faith in God’s grace, and may God’s peace within us flow outward in love for the world around us; Amen.