

Kindness as Dissent

Luke 13:10-17

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My friend Nathan Stone in Waco has a sign in his front yard which says, “Be kind.” My first thought when he sent me a picture was, “That’s like having a yard sign saying, ‘Say Thank You.’” Some behavior is so basic that we start teaching babies and toddlers to do them as soon as we can, “Now, say thank you” and “Be gentle” or “Be kind,” and we keep teaching and reinforcing until it becomes automatic, until it becomes a habit – we learn it by heart. In other words, we become kind and we become gentle, we practice gratitude.

But we’re living in such a time, when it seems to be more and more apparent that a lot of people missed those lessons. So maybe they’ll drive by and see Nathan’s yard sign and say to themselves, “Oh yeah, I need to be kind,” and they’ll slow down, take a deep breath, and try to ease their road rage. Or perhaps they’ll be kind and be glad that someone who is overwhelmed by trying to pay off their student loans is going to be free from those loans.

Our friend Terri Phelps in Louisville told her gay hairstylist she liked his tattoo on his inner arm which said, “Be kind,” which she assumed was an admonition for others to be kind to people considered different from themselves. The haircutter replied, “Thanks. I need to be reminded to be kind to people who don’t like me and people like me.”

Do you remember a couple of decades ago, when billboards, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and even ads on television saying, “Practice Random Acts of Kindness.”

We live in a society so filled with self-interest and disconnected from one another, so hostile to the idea that we actually need one another and that we are to help one another, that we need yard signs and tattoos, television campaigns and t-shirts reminding us to be kind. To be kind seems to be a kind of counter-cultural practice. In a world where so many are angry, fearful, and suspicious to be kind is a kind of dissent. For many of us, to dissent brings images of marches and demonstrations, holding up placards, chanting, singing freedom songs, and so on. Nowadays, just to go over and help someone is an act of defiance.

The truth is kindness is bedrock to being Christian and a follower of the Living God. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians that kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). You live with God, walk in the Spirit, and practice, practice, practice being Christ-like, kindness is one of the results or fruits. Two weeks ago, we talked about the classic words from the prophet Micah (6:8): The Lord expects us to “do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” The prophet Zechariah says that God tells us to “Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor, and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (Zech. 7:9-10).

Luke tells us that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, when he noticed a woman bent with arthritis from which she had suffered for eighteen years. Jesus saw her, noticed her, paid attention to her. I wonder how long she had

been coming to the synagogue and people ignored her or took her for granted, walked around her. But one of the characteristics of kindness is that we notice one another. Jesus sees this suffering woman.

He calls her over and says, “Woman you are set free from your suffering,” and Luke says, “he laid his hands upon her” when he said this. He touched her and she was healed and stood up straight for the first time in eighteen years.

I think it is interesting that Jesus saw her but also spoke to her and touched her – sight, speech, touch.

Yesterday, Jane and I were in Waco for the funeral of friend I had known since my freshmen year at Baylor. He married another friend, whom I’ve known since we were three years old. Of course, at the funeral I saw numerous dear and old friends and we said and constantly overheard, “Let’s stay in touch,” and “I’ve lost touch with ‘so-and-so,’” or “how can I get in touch with you?”

Aristotle considered touch the most fundamental of all the senses. While all the senses are to work together – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – touch has long been considered foundational. Aristotle said that touch is inseparable from life itself and no animal is deprived of touch without also being deprived of life.

We are all aware of the various studies done over the years of how essential touch is to the development of newborn babies. Withhold tactile experiences of being nursed, held, cuddled, bathed, and caressed and infants languish and eventually die. Indeed, compassionate and appropriate touch is a need that continues throughout our lives. For us to flourish and thrive, grow and become, we

need to understand and *feel* we are cherished and loved and known. We need hugs and handshakes, touches on the shoulder or elbow. When we say, “Let’s stay in touch” we are saying more than we know.

I emphasize compassionate and appropriate touch because touch is so powerful and foundational. Touching connects us in deeply important ways. We are not self-enclosed, self-standing, atomized, autonomous beings who are self-made. That we all have belly buttons is to be reminded that humans are interdependent and relational. Unfortunately, this can be and all too often is abused and twisted, and it is why touch must be appropriate and compassionate. Inappropriate touch can result in trauma and alienation, woundedness and pain. Abusive touch destroys trust and can take years of patient, gentle work, and therapy to heal the deep wounds. Touch is foundational.

Back in the late 1950’s, scientist Michael Polanyi coined the term “tacit knowledge” to say that knowledge has many dimensions besides what we can verbalize. Some knowledge must be felt or touched or experienced. It is implicit knowledge in contrast to the explicit knowledge of facts and figures, data and words or numbers. Both are essential but tacit knowledge is a way of saying, “I know it when I feel it.”

Knowing how to ride a bicycle is tacit knowledge. We can explain it, diagram it, and analyze it but we won’t be able to ride a bicycle until we get on it and practice, practice, practice, often under the tutelage of someone who shows us, advises us, holds the bicycle for us, and encourages us. But in the end, we learn by doing and feeling.

In 1951, aeronautical engineer Roger Whitcomb figured out how to redesign the cross-section of an airplane wing to overcome the drag that prevented planes from breaking the sound barrier. There was no shortage of data and studies and mathematical models but apparently, no one could predict the optimum wing shape by calculation. It took tacit knowledge – touch and feel and hands-on knowledge.

Whitcomb spent years studying wind and much of his studies were inside wind tunnels where he felt the wind while he was also analyzing what he felt. He spent over eight years inside of wind tunnels and got to where he knew things that he could not verbalize or explain with formulas and data. Another engineer wrote about Whitcomb, “He sort of feels what the air wants to do.”

Whitcomb was in a wind tunnel and later said the wing design sort of “slipped into my mind” almost unbidden. *After* he designed the ideal wing shape, engineers began to analyze it and figure out the mathematical models (from Brad Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age*, p. 149).

All of this about tacit knowledge and touch and feeling is simply to remind us how essentially important touch is to be human beings. There is much more going on with touch than we can explicitly explain.

In the Bible, there is a long tradition of touching and laying on of hands, especially signifying important events. Anointing with oil was long significant of being set aside for special purpose and along with laying on of hands was considered not simply a ritual but an actual transference of life-giving power from God through the performer of the ritual to the receiver of the ritual. So prophets like Elijah brought about healing by laying his hands on the son of the poor widow

of Zarephath. The power of life went from God through Elijah to the boy and the boy got up. Samuel anointed young David with oil. David was the eighth son of Jessie, but God called David to be the king and Samuel set David aside as someone chosen by God by touching him with oil.

In the New Testament touch and laying on of hands is part and parcel of the ministry of Jesus. Back in Luke 6, we are told that the crowds came to be with Jesus, “had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him healed all of them” (6:18-19).

Perhaps the best-known story of Jesus touching someone and healing them is found in Mark 5:27-29, the story of the woman who had suffered from hemorrhaging for twelve years. The power of life, which is what Jews considered blood to be, was draining out of her. She sought Jesus out in the middle of a crowd and said to herself if she could simply touch his clothing, she would be made whole. When she touched his cloak, Mark says she was immediately healed, and the bleeding stopped.

Mark says that Jesus also immediately knew someone had touched him and that power had gone out of him. Even though he was in a crowd where jostling with others was going on, this woman’s touch was different. Jesus realized something was going on and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

This woman was not seeking mere contact with Jesus. She was looking for the personal touch that put her in intimate relationship with the power of the Living

God that makes whole, gives life, sustains, and liberates people into the fullness God intends for them, for us, to have.

Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Living God, is a kind of conduit through which the power of life and love of God flows through. This life-giving power is not something to hold onto, to hoard, or to protect but is to be shared and given to others.

The New Testament church understood that they were to imitate Christ in the same way. So the book of Acts and Paul's letters are full of stories of touching and healing, laying on of hands and empowerment. Everyone is touching because there is more going on than mere contact. Something of God is happening when we touch.

So in our story today, Jesus, the Living God incarnate, lays hands on this lady bent with arthritis and she is made whole. She stands up straight. The bent woman is unbent

But the Religious Leaders are bent out of shape by anger and resentment. They respond with criticism and indignation, and in one of the biggest examples of missing the point, they say "You can't heal on the sabbath! It's against the rules and the rules are everything!"

I remember years ago in another city, where a woman was the new pastor in an urban mission congregation. One Sunday morning, there was a visiting delegation from a large conservative Baptist church checking out this female pastor. The woman pastor was baptizing three teenaged boys who had been in a

gang in the neighborhood. With her involved ministry these boys were learning that the way of life and life everlasting was through Christ and the body of Christ, the church and they knew that the way of death was through the street gangs and drugs and gun violence. They were being trained in the new way of life and this woman baptized them to the celebration of this small church and much of the neighborhood.

The Baptist church delegation returned to their home church and recommended that the big church cease funding the inner-city mission church because “a woman was baptizing.”

These Religious Leaders could not see the power of healing, wholeness, and life right there in front of them.

Jesus responds to their closed hearts and minds by renaming this woman as “daughter of Abraham.” What does that mean? Who was Abraham? Abraham was the great, great granddaddy of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, a promise was given. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And Jesus says she is a daughter of Abraham. She is an heir to the blessings of God. Moreover, as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labeling. She, bent over though she is, is part of God's great salvation of the whole world.

She stands up straight. Even if her back had not been healed by Jesus, I think she would now have stood up straight. She too becomes a conduit of healing in this

old world. She is blessed and made whole so she might in turn bless others and help them be made whole. She is touched so she might touch others.

Writer David James Duncan tells the story of Gerri Haynes, who was a nurse with Physicians for Social Responsibility. Twenty years ago, she made numerous trips to Iraq to visit and help in hospitals where there were massive numbers of children suffering from leukemia and various kinds of cancers due to spent depleted uranium bullets everywhere on the ground from U.S. military weapons used to destroy Iraqi targets.

Gerri's daughter did not want her mother to go. It was dangerous and her mother had just been diagnosed with breast cancer herself. They talked back and forth and back and forth. Finally, the daughter relented and said, "Okay, Mom, if you go, be completely present, wherever you go."

Gerri would visit in the hospitals, row upon row of dying children in hospital beds, often with a grieving mother sitting alongside the child. Gerri spoke no Arabic and most of the women did not speak English, but Gerri, trying to be "present" look at the child and look at the mother and place her right hand over her own heart.

Usually, the Iraqi mother would place her own right hand over her own heart.

Tears filled the mother's eyes and tears filled Gerri's eyes. And though they were many other beds filled with dying children with mothers nearby, and Gerri intended to visit them all, she remembered her daughter's words, "be completely

present.” She wasn’t sure what that meant, she had no medicine, but she stood with both of her hands out, palms up. The Iraqi mother stood and fell into her arms. They embraced and cried.

Gerri said that experience was not unique. It happened over and over and over (from *God Laughs and Plays*, by David James Duncan, p. 70-72).

There was and is much more that needs to be done. Children were dying in Iraq from lack of medication that in the United States they would have survived. And the same is true in other parts of the world.

All I’m saying this morning, is that sometimes touching, hugging, and embrace is a way, a modest starting place of saying that something is wrong. Showing kindness and mercy is dissent. We are human beings and God does not want us, any of us, to suffer and die without someone touching and hugging. Touching is one way of showing kindness. Of speaking up and calling out - whether it was the bent woman in this Bible story or the woman in Iraq or someone right here in Nacogdoches.

And it is a way to reconnect with God and those around us, becoming conduits for the kind and loving power of the Living God to spread among us into the world beyond us.

May it be so.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

