

The Gifts of Kindness and Gentleness

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
on the Third Sunday of Lent – March 7, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Colossians 3:12-17 & 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8

Kindness and gentleness. Two words that go to the heart of what it means to be a Christian, to live as a person whose life has been transformed by the love of God made real in Jesus Christ and empowered to action by the Holy Spirit. Kindness and gentleness, two qualities sorely needed in the world and ones which are too often nowhere to be found. Or are they? I guess it depends on how hard we look for them, and how much we try to live them out ourselves. For me, kindness is a true joy and surprise when I encounter it, because it is such a rare commodity. Kindness is most visible, I think, in those small actions we take each day when we put someone else's needs ahead of our own. It can be as simple as stopping in heavy traffic to let someone pull out in front of you. Or, opening a heavy door for someone juggling a wheelchair or a stroller. These small moments really make a difference to the person on the receiving end and, when you stop to think about it, cost nothing to provide. And what about those times when you have been on the receiving end of an unexpected kindness. Like when you're attempting to find your way in an unfamiliar place and someone stops and offers just that one extra clarification of direction you needed. Like when the phone rings at the precise moment you are feeling so low that you wonder if you will ever smile again and the cheery voice of a friend says, "I was just thinking about you!"

Gentleness, that too is a rare quality, perhaps even more rare than kindness in some respects. Think about it. Can you think of a person or even a moment in your life when gentleness is the first word to come to mind as a descriptor of someone? Gentleness does not always seem to be a valued characteristic in our world these days, does it? No, too often the people who get noticed are not the people we would praise for their gentleness. In our culture the people who grab our attention are loud and tough and brash – all words which are antonyms for gentleness by the way. Think about it. We just do not hold gentleness in the same high regard as we do other traits and characteristics. At times there are people who even

devalue gentleness implying as it does that the person displaying it is somehow weak or soft, lacking in strength or even commitment. So, how is it that Paul identifies gentleness, along with kindness, as something so desirable for us to have that he lists them among what he calls fruits of the Spirit – the traits which come from living the way Jesus wants us to. Doesn't Jesus expect us to be strong in our faith? Doesn't Jesus want us to be committed to doing whatever it takes to show we are his followers?

Some folks who call themselves Christian would give a definite yes to that question and yet gentleness and kindness have no place in how they live out their faith. In fact, throughout the history of Christianity there have been far too many examples of horrible things done in the name of demonstrating commitment to Jesus. The Crusades leap to mind. So too does the Inquisition and even the Salem Witch trials. Even slavery in this country was believed by some to be an act of kindness to those brought here against their will from Africa to lives of enforced servitude because those poor unfortunates were still exposed to Christianity and could know their souls were saved. And what about all those Native American children taken from their families in this country right up until the mid 20th century to show them the “kindness” of attending Christian schools that systematically set out to destroy their native culture and language in the name of converting souls to Christ. Yes, I think Paul would be horrified at much that has been done with a claim to the kindness and gentleness that he identifies as hallmarks of the way Jesus expects us to live our lives. So, now what? We can't change this awful history, can we? No, but we can certainly impact the present and, by doing so, we can change the future.

This is actually what Paul was talking about in both of these texts. We know it was Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians and he also might have written Colossians. More likely though, Colossians was written by one of his disciples. Noteworthy for us is the gap of time between when each of these letters was written, whether by Paul or someone else in the case of Colossians. 1 Thessalonians is, in fact, the oldest document contained in the New Testament. We assume the Gospels are the oldest but they are not. The earliest of the Gospels to be written down was Mark and that was written roughly around 70 CE. 1 Thessalonians, in contrast, was written as early as 41 CE or as late as 50CE. So, 1 Thessalonians was written almost

30 years *before* the first Gospel was written down. Even more notable, remember that Jesus died on the cross sometime between 30-36 CE. That means that Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica was written within 10 years of Jesus' death!! 10 years! That is the blink of an eye. Jesus' life and teachings were still very much alive in the hearts and minds of the people who heard him preach and teach and watched him heal the ill and hopeless. This means Paul was writing this beautiful text in 1 Thessalonians when some people could still remember what Jesus' voice sounded like, when others could share the stories they'd heard from people who were there when the loaves and fishes were shared and when the tomb was found empty. This is so close into the time of Jesus himself that we can literally hear him speaking through these words of Paul:

“As you know ... we never came with words of flattery ... nor did we seek praise. ... We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.”

What an extraordinary image of love and compassion this is! Paul is telling those ancient readers at the church in Thessalonica that God's love for them, made real in Jesus, is like a nurse caring for her own children. Nurse here refers to a “wet” nurse or a nurse that nurses babies not her own, an incredibly gentle yet powerful image of love that gives life. Gentleness is key to this image as we envision the nurse cradling the baby needing to feed. Important to note here as well is that this nurse who usually cares for the children of others is now caring for her own children in the same way. How much gentler and loving will she be for her own children! This, Paul says, is what the gentleness of Jesus enlivens your life. This is what happens when you are able to let the Good News, the abiding love of God made incarnate in Jesus, into your life.

But what of this text in Colossians? It comes before 1 Thessalonians in the New Testament. Doesn't that mean it's older or more important? No, it just means that when the canon was put together, someone decided on a particular order, probably based on the length of each text within each category. Colossians is, in fact, much later in origin than 1 Thessalonians having been written no earlier than 90 CE. That means it was written close to 50 years after 1 Thessalonians and 20 years after the Gospel of Mark. Paul could have written it at the end of his life, while he was in prison in

Rome, but it was most likely written by one of his followers or students. Scholars believe this is the case because the writing style is similar to Paul's but not exactly the same, and the Christology – the theology of Christ – espoused in Colossians is in places quite different from what we know to be Paul's in parts of the letter.

Our text today from Colossians, which does follow Paul's Christology closely, is a summary of how the author is urging the people to adopt what are seen as the virtues which come from committing one's life to living as a follower of Christ. The author is actually pretty specific about what this is:

“... holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another ... forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you. ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

This language makes clear that by this time in the churches, the personal memories of Jesus are fading and the people are struggling to hold on to this faith so different from everything else around it. This is essentially a list of what it means to follow Jesus so that all the people who had no connection to him or anyone who knew him can still live as Jesus intended. This beautiful text is actually quite compelling, urging those ancient church folk from Colossae – and us – to wrap ourselves in compassion and kindness, meekness and patience. We are to do this so intentionally that these Christian virtues become like clothing, revealing right away who we are to each person we encounter. And how are we able to do this impossible thing? By first putting on, wrapping ourselves up in love because it is love that brings it all together. Once again love is identified as the essential ingredient that makes this whole Jesus way of life work. Without love, we are all left floundering, relying only on our own devices which are never, ever enough to meet the challenges of life in this broken and hurting world. No, this writer is telling the people in Colossae and us too, “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.” Let Jesus show you the way forward, especially when you can't figure things out on your own, is the message here. Let Jesus open your mind and heart to the richness of God's love that enables kindness to be your way of life.

What's interesting to me as we look at these two texts side by side is that the text closer in time to Jesus is much simpler and shorter. The emphasis of the 1 Thessalonians text is on the gentleness which grows from the love Christ makes manifest, itself expressed in the deep, personal concern Paul is expressing to these people he obviously knows and loves personally. In contrast the letter to Colossae, is a pretty formulaic summary of what virtues one should possess as a follower of Christ. It is a beautiful summary, to be sure, but it also reads as a bit of a checklist for life as a Christian. This we can attribute to the time gap between the writing of the two letters. 1 Thessalonians was written from within the cocoon of the promises of Jesus' unconditional love and promised return "soon." By the time Colossians is written, Jesus' love is still the centerpiece of all, but the new reality of needing to figure out how to live as a Christian in the world as it is each day is becoming ever more pressing.

And that we can relate to! The world in which we live each day is a place where kindness and gentleness are sorely needed but in desperately short supply. So, the question for us today is how do we bring the gifts of kindness and gentleness into our approach to life each day? How do we embody Christ's love to such an extent that kindness and gentleness are more than something we do when we remember and have time? How do we live so that kindness and gentleness are *who we are*, every moment of every day? That, dear ones, is *the* question for us and it is one without easy answers. You know as well as I do that there are far too many situations in which kindness and gentleness are less than front and center in our lives. It's so hard to be kind when people are unkind, mean, harsh, rude. It feels impossible to be gentle when people are rigid, cruel, thoughtless and hurtful. Yet that is precisely what Jesus asks of us. It is precisely what Paul tells us we should be able to do IF we are able to embody the love we find through Jesus, IF we allow the fruits of the Spirit to take root and grow stronger and stronger in our souls each day. Yikes! That sounds like an impossible challenge. But whoever said it would be easy to follow Jesus? Certainly not Jesus himself. Not Paul or his followers. Not Peter or any of the disciples. Embodying the love of Jesus all the time? Kindness and gentleness worn by us like clothing? Sounds impossible for sure. But we won't know until we try, will we? I'm game. Are you? Amen.