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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Micah 6:6-8

Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:25-32

DESIGNER CLOTHES: KINDNESS

Have you ever encountered someone who seemed to be so kind, only to find out it was just a ‘put on,’ an act? Their expression or their words dripped with honey, but the kindness was only a veneer-thick effort to make a sell or to influence a decision. I imagine we could simply open it up for stories you might share about such encounters, but we won’t, because we’re focusing on another kind of ‘put on’ – a true putting on of kindness. Over a number of weeks, in this series of sermons, we are focusing on the call for us to dress in the wardrobe of the relational qualities that God would have us wear as outlined in Colossians 3:12. There we are urged as God’s beloved to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Last week, we focused on compassion. I ask you to kindly focus with me on the second in that list today – kindness.

You and I have choices in how we approach others around us. We can generally do so with hostility, indifference, or kindness. I’m thankful for the random acts of kindness that are encouraged by bumper stickers – I assume you have seen those. But scripture urges us as people of faith not to be random with our practice of kindness, but to have a clear pattern of a kind kind of behavior that permeates our encounters with others. The inspiration for our kindness is not some bumper sticker, but the kindness shown to us in “the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus,” as the Book of Ephesians puts it. Then later, as a response to God’s kindness, the Ephesian Christians are told this: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” They were being instructed to put away the kind of behaviors that would tear a community apart, instead of bringing it together.

People like for others to treat them with kindness. The great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.”¹ However, we are called to kindness not just because it is admirable and might lead to certain kindnesses that may rebound back toward us. Actually, scripture calls us to go beyond just being kind. In a list of three things the prophet Micah notes as being what God requires of us, it includes the call for us to love kindness. We like, we might even love to be on the receiving end of kindness. We might be tempted to be kind because we view such an act as something akin to an investment that might come back our way. But we are told that among the behaviors that the Lord requires of us is for us to love kindness, which would include having a desire that true kindness grow within our hearts and our actions in relation to others, even toward those who are less than kind toward us.

We love kindness because it is the approach toward others, rather than hostility or indifference, that enables us to be in fuller communion with our God. It is frankly more godly than the other approaches. That does not mean that there are not times when we will be angry or frightened. It is difficult to be kind at such times. But God will help us grow in kindness if we love the kindness God wants to place in our hearts and lives.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and writer, tells the story of a rabbi who disappeared on the eve of every Sabbath “to commune with God in the forest.” At least that is what his congregation thought. But they were curious about it, so one night, they surreptitiously sent one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounters. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old gentile woman sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once there the rabbi cooked for her and carried her firewood and swept the floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue. Back in the village the people interrogated the one they’d sent to follow him, “Did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?” “Oh no,” the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause; “he went much higher than that.”²

Loving-kindness is a spiritual practice at the core of everyday life. But it is also the corporate practice that rightly defines the quality of a community of faith like Abington Presbyterian, in how we relate to one another and toward those beyond this community of faith. In Barbara Kingsolver's novel, Animal Dreams, one of her characters, a young horticulturist, named Hallie, has gone off to Nicaragua to work with those who were mired in poverty. In a letter to her sister, Codi, back home in the States, she tries to explain her choices:

Codi, here's what I've decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right into it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elemental kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides.³

We don't have to go to a foreign country to seek and live out elemental kindness. Such a loving of kindness might overlap with what else Micah said was required of us as people of faith, doing justice and walking humbly with God. It also might overlap with the compassion we talked about last week. God has poured out divine kindness upon us in many ways so we can grow in our love of kindness and reflect more of who God is through our actions. There is no need to use kindness with ulterior motives. Let us aspire to love kindness as a central part of who we are. As we live in such ways, kindness will grow to be much more than just a random thing with us, even as we live in it, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Joshua_Heschel

² Joan Chittister, There is a Season, Orbis, 1995

³ Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams, New York: HarperCollins, 1990