

## THE MORALITY OF KINDNESS

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, November 11, 2018

Scripture: 2 Samuel 9; Luke 10:29b-37

On the way to church last Sunday, I read the op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Melissa Fay Greene about the tragic shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. It was the one that Bob mentioned in his *First Matters* column last week. Many of you probably read it. Greene wrote a powerful response highlighting the ordinary details of people's lives, the little decisions that were also part of such a day. She captured so much of the heartbreak of this violent act. She compared elements of that event to the bombing of the Hebrew Benevolent Temple in Georgia in 1958.

She wrote a book about that bombing called "The Temple Bombing" in which she quoted the editor of the Atlanta Constitution at the time, Ralph McGill, who said:

*It is not possible to preach lawlessness and restrict it," he wrote. "You do not preach and encourage hatred for the Negro and hope to restrict it to that field. It is an old, old story. It is one repeated over and over again in history. When the wolves of hate are loosed on one people, then no one is safe."*<sup>1</sup>

As we stand in the wake of what has been dubbed the most critical mid-term election in "our lifetime" and at a time, when as one colleague put it, "the world seems to be tearing itself apart," the wolves of hate feel as multitudinous and as close as the traffic on Fifth Avenue.

Despite all the very good reasons to be anxious this week, I have found myself feeling a deep sense of calm. In part, because I have been asking myself repeatedly how we can find steady ground in a world where the wolves of hate are loosed? I don't believe this question is a new one; in actuality, many theological schools of thought have grown out of such chaos. I do believe that many of us think the world is at a particularly feverish pitch of chaos right now, but people of various faith traditions have struggled with this question over centuries and decades and answered in a myriad of different ways.

In days like these, there are, of course, a number of different choices in how to find our way in the world. I don't believe there is one simple path, but I do want to submit to you today, for conversation, one possible entry point. What if we articulated and lived more fully into a morality of kindness? We don't talk about morality much anymore and there are some worthy reasons why. Morality at times, being a humanly interpreted construct, has excluded and hurt people who should have been welcomed into our communities. Morality has excluded in the most hurtful ways people who are LGBTQ, persons who are divorced, women who have made their own reproductive choices, people who have been incarcerated, the mentally ill, just to name a few.

The idea of a moral framework remains but the word morality holds more power of suspicion than weight of reverence. However, I am hearing it bubble again to the surface in terms of actualizing values, from places which lean heavily on ethical structures but have not yet reclaimed the word morality. I have heard questions among my colleagues in the Religious Education Association about if a return to moral theology might help in conversations we are having around uprooting racism; I have heard morality mentioned by candidates for the Head of

School at my daughter's Quaker school in relation to emphasizing Quaker values as a balance to what is valued by American culture.

Morality can give us a calm center, a place to stand when the wolves of hate are on our heels and anxiety overwhelms us. But to do so we must reclaim its strengths for this new day. How can we reshape a new morality? What if we lived in a moral framework that had kindness as its governor? What if we were to put kindness - defined as sympathetic, helpful nature, having patience and forbearance -right in the center of our moral framework? What does it mean to center around kindness in this way? Does kindness have enough gravitas to hold that center?

Kindness is an obvious choice in some ways, but it suffers from possibly being heard as cliché. It's easy to say "be kind" as a slipshod imperative. One of the participants in the mid-week Bible study said recently that she didn't want suggestions about how to encounter the world today that felt like platitudes. That request is reasonable. When I suggest kindness as a moral center, you might already be rolling eyes in agreement with her and thinking that's exactly the kind of banal sermon you don't need and turn your mind to your brunch plans. Yet, before you do, let me ask you a question: Do you find it easy in all circumstances to be kind?

You all, in my experience, are much better disciples than I am most days, and I am always learning from your patience and ways you give the benefit of the doubt to others. Your experience may be different than mine. But if I'm honest with you, I have an awfully hard time being kind consistently. Kindness doesn't work very easily as an imperative. Being kind is hard. Yet kindness is something that I long for these days and I hear others longing for it as well. There doesn't seem to be much or enough kindness in our world right now.

Being kind is a nuanced way of relating to one another, to our communities, and to ourselves. It requires presence and patience. I can tell myself to be kind, I even tell my children with some frequency to be kind to each other, but it's not very simple. Sometimes it feels downright impossible. Sometimes I don't know if I am being kind or being passive. Sometimes I worry that being kind in our world will allow me to be taken advantage of, or that I will appear cowardly. I am afraid if I am kind I will get hurt, over and over and I want to protect myself. I am searching for ways to be kind when the wolves of hate are driving me toward fear, unbridled ambition, and an unhealthy competitiveness.

Kindness is defined as a quality or state or being gentle or considerate. Kindness is to have a sympathetic or helpful nature, having patience and forbearance. When I started nosing around in the biblical texts to see where kindness appeared, I was surprised to find that kindness is not a very frequently used word in the Bible. The idea of kindness is pretty common in the biblical narrative, I would argue, but the word kindness is often embedded in other big theological blockbusters like mercy, grace and righteousness. Kindness itself is not named very often. When I found this story about David in 2 Samuel 9 that Diane read for us this morning, I was excited about what it teaches about kindness.

David is motivated to show kindness to anyone from Jonathan's family because of his deep relationship with Jonathan. In case the story is a little rusty, you might recall that Jonathon and David were contemporaries in age and probably grew up together.

Jonathon's dad was Saul, the man who was anointed by Samuel to be the first king over Israel. David came to the court after being selected to battle Goliath and him and Jonathon became inseparable. They were like brothers, possibly lovers, and as fate would have it, when David was

selected by God to replace Saul, Jonathon protected David from his father's wrath, even though he himself would have been next in line for the throne. Saul was eventually killed, allowing David to gain the throne, and along those battle lines Jonathon was also killed. This devastating loss was what motivated David to show kindness to Mephibosheth.

I like how David describes this kindness that he wants to show to honor Jonathon as "God's kindness." It makes kindness almost otherworldly. Divine. Kindness is an act beyond normal human capacity. That seems right to me, given what I know of how difficult kindness is to sustain. David's financial gift of the land and the laborers to work that land is part of his expression of kindness, and the other part is an offer of hospitality to Mephibosheth to always be welcome at his table. Kindness sustains and opens its arms of hospitality. It is an act that becomes bigger than the persons who are enacting it.

If David models personal motivation for kindness in this story, the parable of the Good Samaritan that Bob read for us today comes quickly to mind when we think of acts of kindness. In this parable, the Samaritan's kind actions, like David's, are relational. Unlike David's, the Samaritan acts out of kindness for humanity, not an individual relationship; but out of what seems to be a larger ethic, out of a morality grounded in kindness. It is interesting that kindness is *not* used here, but rather the word mercy. It is "eleos" in the Greek, "mercy, kindness or good will toward the miserable or afflicted."<sup>2</sup>

The story of the Good Samaritan is a more politically charged encounter with the listeners than it first appears. The Samaritans were not well liked by those who live south of there, especially in Jerusalem. And on this treacherous stretch of road between Jericho and Jerusalem, meeting up with a Samaritan would not have necessarily been a welcome encounter. There were political tensions about the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans believed the ark rightly belonged in Samaria and not in Jerusalem, and the division on this matter was real and intense. How often the wrong things come between us and our ability to be kind. The Samaritan doesn't know that others passed this man by, he doesn't even know if in better times this man would have nodded his head in acknowledgement at him, he simply acts out of morality of kindness. It doesn't really matter to him what the person before him did, he may not even know about the Levite or the priest. Kindness is that sort of tangible moral anchor, it's not dependent on what anyone else does, kindness is just what is required of us.

We get bogged down though if we think that kindness is only about relating to strangers who are in dire need of help, or that kindness is only for those with whom we have strong devotional ties. What I love about hearing these two stories together is that they remind us that the meaning of kindness spans a wide spectrum of relations. Kindness is for that relative who you will be seeing Thanksgiving who aligned in a different political arena than you. Kindness is for your dog who wakes you up in the middle of night chasing the cat under the bed. Kindness is for your neighbor who curses at you in the elevator for no apparent reason. Kindness is for your ex, kindness is for your in-laws, kindness is for your parents, kindness is for the person who jostles you too hard on the subway. Kindness is for your children. Kindness is for your spouse and your lover. Kindness is for your siblings. Even if there are those among that list who cannot muster kindness in response, we are challenged to act with kindness.

Kindness doesn't mean being passive or a push-over, but it does mean that you center yourself on what you know is kind, even if everyone else is just walking by. Even when it means you have to take a deep breath and simmer down. Kindness is something we practice, knowing

we won't always get it right. The strength of building a community of kindness means that we have each other to rely on and build from our understanding of kindness. If we say, okay that person is not acting with kindness to us, we don't make our decision about how we will behave based on how anyone else behaves. We act out of kindness even if the world is tearing itself apart around us, because we believe discipleship has always been counter-cultural, and that is no less so true today. Acting kind in the world will make us feel otherworldly at times, yet there is no more important time to be living with kindness than now. Kindness is not something we save for those inside our circle, kindness is something we practice in the world, with the world, sometimes with people who we know and fear are going to hurt us again.

The wolves of hate thrive on building a culture of hatred. They do so with chaotic howls at the first shadow of darkness. They do so by threatening our security and making us too afraid to move. They do so by demanding we compete with them, knowing that only our unkindness has enough fuel to make that a fair fight. And out of that chaos, we in our fear are taken down or we become like wolves ourselves. Approaching these wolves with kindness is a whole different framework. Kindness does not brag. Kindness does not hide behind a tree, kindness does not cower before chaos, because like the Levite and the priest, chaos follows its own path. Kindness knows that it follows a different path. Kindness moves out of the shadows, not unafraid, but like the Samaritan, kindness is not willing to be transformed into a wolf. There are so many ways the world needs gentleness, compassion, patience and forbearance, we are beckoned by a morality of kindness. I'm going to give it a try. Will you join me?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-wolves-of-hate-are-loose-no-one-is-safe/2018/11/02/a1df5bc0-de0d-11e8-b732-3c72cbf131f2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.603190ffe048](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-wolves-of-hate-are-loose-no-one-is-safe/2018/11/02/a1df5bc0-de0d-11e8-b732-3c72cbf131f2_story.html?utm_term=.603190ffe048)

<sup>2</sup> Thayer's Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 203.