



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Reverend Dr. William J. Danaher, Jr.

"Kindness" - The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - 7/12/2020

[The Lessons for The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost](#)

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Probably 25 years ago, I was with my daughter, Phoebe, who was then three years old at the time. And I was teaching at this college that was located in Sewanee, Tennessee, a tiny little college that was located on a mountain top, far away from everything. And I had Phoebe for the day and so we decided to drive into Chattanooga to kind of see the bright lights and the big city and to have some Chinese food.

And as we were leaving that afternoon, we went by this children's store and Phoebe said, can we go in there? And I said, sure. And we went in and she went right up to the really expensive dresses that were there for the children. And these were costumes, but they were just incredible handmade stuff. They were brilliant and beautiful. And Phoebe took one green costume out and she said, Daddy, can I try this on? And I asked the manager of the store, she said, it'd be fine.

And so Phoebe tried on the dress and she looked in the mirror and she did something I'd never seen her do. She kind of just held onto the hem of the dress and she said, it's beautiful. I looked at the cost of it. It was \$69. And I said, we couldn't afford it. We didn't have two nickels to rub together in those days. And so I had Phoebe take off the dress and I put it on the rack, and I said that we would ask mom when we got home. We got back into the car and went back up to our little mountain top home and the image of Phoebe standing in that mirror and holding onto the hem of the dress, it just haunted me the entire weekend.

And Phoebe did ask Claire and Claire was wonderful and maternal and firm that we couldn't quite afford a \$69 dress that she would grow out of within about two months. And I was resigned to this fate. But I had this moment on Monday in which I realized I had a two-hour gap in my classes that I was teaching. I suddenly realized I was going to do something impulsive and rash. And I jumped in the car and I drove to Chattanooga. It's normally about a 50-minute journey. I made it in about 35 minutes. I ran into the store and I bought the dress. I got back into the

car and I was headed back to my next class and I was pulled over by a state trooper.

I sat there on the road and I thought to myself, this is a disaster. I'm going to miss the class and everything's going to get out of whack. People are going to get resentful that I'm going to have to come home and I'll have ruined this whole idea of the surprise. And so he came up and I rolled down the window and I said to him, sir, I am guilty as sin and you know it, I was going too fast. But if you look in the back of this car, you're going to see a green dress in a package. And that's for a little girl and that girl is my daughter. I rushed down to buy it for her because I wanted her to have something nice. And I hope you understand, but I just wanted to let you know that.

And the state trooper stepped back and then he looked at me and he said, these days pass quickly, go home. And he let me go. And I remember that moment, that little gesture of kindness. I got there to my class and I brought the dress and Phoebe thought I was the dad that I wanted her to think I was, and there was this incredible moment of joy and celebration when we put on the dress and that she went around in it. And I realized everything kind of pivoted around that one gesture of kindness that that officer had shown me.

What is kindness? We live in a time in which we have a desperate need for kindness. In fact, we live in a time in which there is so much division and distrust, so much tumult and so much fear that kindness seems to be in short supply. But what is kindness? The young William James Jr. in 1902 went to see his uncle, Henry James, who was the wonderful novelist and essayist. And he said, can you give me some advice as I'm going to school and I'm going to be on my own, and I want to know what it's like to be in this world? What should I do? And how should I be? And Henry James said to him, three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.

And in the late 1980s, early 1990s, Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was asked by an interviewer what his philosophy of life was. And he remembered this interview with Henry James and he cited it. He said the secret to success is to do three things, to be kind, to be kind, to be kind. All of us, I think, know instinctively what it means to be kind. We know when we are being treated kindly and when we're being treated unkindly yet the question remains what is kindness?

And I want to suggest to you today that kindness is a gesture that goes with the grain of God's mercy. Kindness is not a total thing. It's not something that you would see once and for all in all things, but kindness is incredibly particular and it is a kind of gesture, a kind of act that is laid in with meaning and symbolism and love that somehow goes with the grain of God's grace. And kindness is not something we can instruct someone to do easily. It's not something that you can simply do with your hands or your feet. It has to come out of your very being.

Kindness by going with God's grace extends and somehow encapsulates in a small form a reminder that we are God's beloved.

The root of kindness in English is kin. It's the same idea in which you have a kind of – it expresses a kind of gesture of shared humanity, of shared race of shared nationhood, of being neighbors to one another. And so to be kind to someone, to be kind to a stranger, to practice as the bumper stickers, once said, random acts of kindness is to actually say to another person. That you matter to me and that we are connected in ways that we somehow cannot fully express, except sometimes in gestures, in kind actions, in a moment of mercy. When we hold a door or we let someone go, when we care for another person we begin to step into that larger gesture of God's grace to us.

Kindness is in short supply these days because we are in a time of pandemic in which we are experiencing incredible amounts of distance from one another in which it's hard for us to even have human interactions. And kindness seems to depend upon that kind of interactivity, that kind of exchange, so that the gesture in all of its power can be shared. And yet kindness is so necessary because what are we without kindness? Without kindness, without gentleness, without the wonderful meekness and lovingness that we show one another, without the tenderness, we show one another, we become only some people to be somehow bought and sold or traded on the market, or our meetings with one another become purely economical. But kindness asks us to step more deeply into a relationship and to express it with an action that is laden with meaning. With a gesture that says you matter, you are beloved.

In our Fruits of the Spirit series, we've been talking about love, joy, peace, patience, and now we turn to kindness. I want to suggest to you that kindness is something that is so context dependent that you and I will have to think through in our minds prayerfully to see those moments in which someone has been kind for us and to us. And that moment of incredible kindness somehow turns and makes us aware of the depth of our relationship. So kindness exists. In the small spaces between us, it exists in ways that we can scarcely sometimes see, except in the moment when it emerges. And because of that, I believe that kindness is best explained and approached through images and poetry and stories.

And today I offer you three poems about kindness. And in each of these problems, I want you to see a slightly different inflection of the language of kindness. The first inflection is that kindness is a kind of gesture of love. And so the first poem is from an Irish poet, Leanne O'Sullivan. The title of the poem is Leaving Early. O'Sullivan wrote these poems as her husband was trying to recover from this incredible brain infection that wiped away his memory and it required him only to kind of somehow communicate through the animals he could see outside of the window of his hospital room.

And so, O'Sullivan writes this poem about leaving early, about a moment in which she has to go, and she has to trust the kindness of the nurses that will be caring for her husband that night. And this is the poem "Leaving Early".

"My Love,
Tonight Fionnuala is your nurse.
You'll hear her voice sing-song around the ward
lifting a wing at the shore of your darkness.
I heard that, in another life, she too journeyed
through a storm, a kind of curse, with the ocean
rising darkly around her, fierce with cold,
and no resting place, only the frozen
rocks that tore her feet, the light on her shoulders.

And no cure there but to wait it out.
If, while I'm gone, your fever comes down –
if the small, salt-laden shapes of her song
appear to you as a first glimmer of earth-light,
follow the sweet, hopeful voice of that landing.
She will keep you safe beneath her wing."

Leaving Early is a poem that works at an immediate level. O'Sullivan is leaving her husband for the day and she's trusting him and entrusting him to the kindness of the nurses in the hospital. And you and I reading this now, we can see something of the resonance between the many people who have practiced kindness in our hospitals, the caregivers and nurses and doctors who have continued to not only serve, but to serve with kindness. And you can see some resonances with the current pandemic in which there is no cure there but to wait it out.

O'Sullivan knits within this poem an even deeper message, which is that the term, the word Fionnuala is a reference, not only to an actual nurse that might be there on the ward of the hospital, but also to an Irish story or legend of a daughter who is changed into a swan by an evil enchantress. And she was stuck as a swan for 900 years until finally she found her way back to being human and back to home.

And so everything in this poem is a journey through the darkness and the cold that Fionnuala had to do in the legend. And O'Sullivan brings that up for her husband because it's a reminder to us that kindness requires a kind of knowledge. The gesture of kindness is not just a gesture of care that is physical, but a kind of grace that is metaphysical that is spiritual and powerful. And if any of us are going to step into the kindness of love, we have to not only practice things with our hands, but believe them with all of our hearts. And so she tells her husband the Fionnuala, the nurse, the Fionnuala, the legend, and things all that are larger than anything that we can counter measure or see or touch or feel. All of these things will keep you safe beneath her wing.

The second poem I want to bring up to you speaks about the gesture of kindness as a kind of liberty, as a kind of release, as a kind of liberation, as a kind of movement into freedom and permission to be. And this is by an Afro Caribbean poet named Kei Miller. It's called "Book of Genesis".

"Suppose there was a book of only one word," he writes,
"/*let* – from whose clipped sound all things begin: fir
and firmament, feather, the first whale – and suppose

we could scroll through its pages every day
to find and pronounce a *Let* meant only for us –
we would stumble through the streets with open books,

eyes crossed from too much reading; we would speak
in auto-rhyme, the world would echo itself – and still
we'd continue in rounds, saying *let* and *let* and *let*

until even silent dreams had been allowed."

Miller writes from the perspective of someone who knows marginalization, as an Afro Caribbean living in England. Of someone who knows marginalization, as someone who is gay and a sexual minority. And so this word *let* is a word of kindness. It's a word of liberation. It's a word of liberty. It's a promise of freedom and it's a prayer that all experience that graciousness such as I experienced on the way home with a car full of a dress to see my daughter.

The third poem is written by myself. And this is to speak about kindness as peace, because so often when we are kind we have to let go of any kind of return. So often when we are trying to be kind, we have to recognize the fact that we may never be acknowledged for the goodness we do in this world. And that the focus of our lives is to somehow follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the sower of the seed, as we read in today's gospel. And so this poem is called "The Parable of the Sower".

"We will never know the good we do when we do it rightly
Forgiving is more than material, we must open our hands
We surrender all that we have, trusting the wind, the seed
We must even trust the soil that it takes the gift we offer
Goodness cannot be controlled, managed to our satisfaction
We can only share what we have lost while waiting for the spring"

You and I are called to practice a kind of kindness which is a reminder of the peace of God, which passes all understanding. So peace, liberty, and love, these are all gestures that go with the grain of God's grace. And as you and I are called to do today in the gospel, we are called to let the seed of God's word dwell

deeply within us, to open ourselves to God's presence in our lives, to be transformed and to be agents of transformation in this world.

In what way can you do a kindness - a kindness of love, a kindness of liberty? Who needs to hear from you the words "let"? And in what ways can you give and find in the giving the peace of knowing that you are acting within the love and grace and mercy of God?

Amen.