

## **“The Kindness of God is Proclaimed and Expected”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

For the Second Sunday of Lent

on Sunday, February 25, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

If you want to think about how to be kind, do not listen to or watch the news. Bombings outside of Damascus in Syria, a fifth anniversary of the war and destruction around Aleppo, tensions in other areas of the Middle East and famine in parts of Africa – that is only the beginning of the pain and heart-ache around the world this week. The ongoing debate in the United States around gun control as a result of a massive shooting in Florida, and the controversy within Canada about politicians' activity and the harbouring of Sikh separatists, fill out the local news.

How can we even think of being kind in the midst of such devastation and hatred?

Throughout Lent we will explore ideas that have come from the provocative and insightful pen of the late Richard Wagamese as he attempted to communicate his insights on life in his book *Embers*.

Today we reflect on the word “kind.” As Terry Small writes in his latest Brain Bulletin: “We all know we should be kind to others – our families, co-workers, neighbours, strangers. Everyone benefits. It turns out, though, that the one who benefits the most is probably you.”

Small goes on to detail how being kind actually improves our own brain health. A study in California assigned people to do five random acts of kindness each day over a six week period. The end result? Their happiness levels increased 41.66%.

Other studies have shown that kindness can:

- Contribute to the maintenance of good health
- Diminish the effect of physical and psychological illness
- Improves emotional well-being
- Elevated levels of dopamine, the “helper’s high”
- Slows down the aging process
- Improves relationships
- And, best of all, kindness is contagious.

Be kind, says Small, and your brain and body will thank you.

The words of the Psalmist read earlier speak of a God who rules the world, and is in control, but it is the kind of control where concern for others, a sense of empathy and kindness (though the word itself is not used), is implied. We need not fear God, for God will always be there for us.

This week the world learned of the death of Billy Graham, probably the best known evangelist or preacher of the last century. Many clips of former crusades and interviews were played, and memories of him by those who knew him well were shared.

I always thought of Graham as a classic “fire and brimstone” kind of preacher, yet many of the clips being replayed, which sound true to his overall message, emphasize the compassion and love of God – God is kind to us if we but open ourselves to God. The “fire” came from his passion to get the message across, not the judgment that some of us heard.

Mark speaks of the impending death of Jesus, and Jesus rebukes those who will not hear him out. Jesus was true to his calling, and aware of his future. Being kind to others first of all involves being kind and honest with one’s self. If we are not open and clear ourselves, we will not experience the fullness of the kindness of others.

So honesty is related to kindness; selflessness is related to being able to be kind.

You see the wisdom of Richard Wagamese’s teachings? He has built a pyramid of truths, one block building on the other.

Being kind must entail being respectful, and respect always has an attitude of truthfulness to it.

We make major errors in our attitude to life when we say that as Christians we are to be kind, so we cannot call people to accountability, or being kind means that we can never challenge someone who is dishonest, or being kind means that we overlook errors and irresponsible actions that impact others because, well, we should be “kind.”

Surprisingly the Bible uses the word “kind” rarely. Most often the word translated “kind” is the Hebrew word “*min*,” which means “kind” in the sense of “species,” almost always found in the book of Genesis and other books of the Torah where teachings relate to the different kind of animals in creation, on the ark, or for sacrifice.

Likewise in the New Testament, the word translated “kind” is the Greek “*genos*,” also often translated as “species.” There are two key passages where the word “kind” appears, and almost all of you could quote the one – it is in I Corinthians 13 where Paul speaks of love as being, among other things, “kind,” or “*chrestos*.” In the book of Ephesians, Paul speaks of the role of the Christian to get rid of all malice and hatred toward others, but to be “kind and gentle” to others.

So there you have it. Why so few references? I think possibly because the Bible was written when people were trying to understand how they can accept the qualities of being faithful to God in their personal faith, and only later as the church developed and taught about the community itself did teachings about the way we interact with one another become important and clear.

John Maxwell in his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* does not speak about being kind, but does include “respect.” People respect us when we do not treat them as

inferiors, but as equals and as people with skills and gifts. Being kind to others engenders respect, and allows for strong leadership and direction within an organization.

Yet again, indigenous teachings also blend the sense of “kind” in terms of a species and “kind” in terms of gentleness and acceptance.

Bobby Lake-Thom, a traditional spiritual healer and teacher, also known as Medicine Grizzly Bear, is from California with Seneca background. He believes it is important not just for indigenous people but for all people to have a name connected to nature and to the animals and birds. He suggests you go off into a natural setting (could be a park in the city or the side of a mountain or a camping site near a river) and sit still, and pay attention to the animals, birds, insects, snakes that come – why are they there? What message do they give? What are you drawn to? That may determine your animal name for all time.

If we are kind to nature, nature will respond kindly to us – it is part of the circle of life. “Names serve to bond a person and family to Nature and are a constant reminder of one’s kinship with the Earth.”

Bobby Lake-Thom feels the Nature names of his children, each one given after a four day Vision quest with fasting, help to connect them to nature.

An attitude of acceptance and openness leads to kindness. It is the indigenous way. It is the Christian way – when love is enacted, being kind is the essence of how we relate to others, says Paul.

Love is patient and kind, it is not jealous or boastful or rude. May we hear those words with new awareness this day, and be thankful.