

KINDNESS AND THE HARVEST

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield, 6/14/20
Church of the Good Shepherd, Pine Grove, Bluemont, VA.
Trinity Episcopal Church, Martinsburg, W.VA.

Matthew (9:35-10:8) tells us that Jesus went about all the cities and villages.....Proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest.”¹

Our Lord’s words could be describing our nation as “harassed and helpless,” as we face the coronavirus that is causing covid-19, resulting in many deaths. Systemic racism has brought about the deaths of many innocent black people by the police. The difference this time is that we witnessed the killing of George Floyd as he cried out for his mother and gasped his last words, “I can’t breathe.” In spite of the threat of the deadly coronavirus, with people pushed together, people of our nation have responded with protest demonstrations all over America. The need for a harvest of justice has been shown by frustrated, angry, people of both the black and white races.

Last week I read an article that was very positive. In these troubled times of ours, it is most appropriate to include excerpts from the article in the sermon. Steven Petrow wrote *In dark days, kindness can help all of us.*²

¹ *Revised Common Lectionary:Episcopal Edition*:Church Publishing Inc., New York, NY;Proper 6, Year A:Matthew 9:35-10:8, page 146

² Petrow, Steven;*Washington Post, In dark days Kindness can help all of us.* June 7,2020:Health and Science section pages 1 and 4.

The article began acknowledging the angry frustrations over the death of George Floyd when a police officer pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for eight minutes, thereby murdering him; tear-gassing of protesters who've had enough killing: covid deaths of over 100,000 people and heated arguments over masking followed.

Yet Petrow pointed out, only a few weeks ago, we saw kids hanging hand colored rainbows and hearts in their house and apartment windows, with chalk messages of thanks to front line responders and adults making masks and organizing food drives. They then briefly charged from their homes to clap, cheer, and bang pots for healthcare workers and other essential workers.

Was that all an illusion? Kindness toward others- even ourselves - had been shown to help balance seesawing emotions, which we all have these days. Yet in these fraught times, somehow the idea of kindness seems quaint if not passe.

Yet even if it feels like darkness, people are reaching out to others to help, even if they don't dominate the news.

In Atlanta, for instance, fraternity men from historically black colleges, cleaned up neighborhood streets after a night of protest and violence. "We are better than this, the city's mayor, Kelsha Lance Bottoms, said the day before."

Ditto in Cleveland, where Ricky Smith, the founder of *Random Acts of Kindness Everywhere*, brought his message of positivity" downtown to help "people think outside of themselves and help others."

Last week a man on a street in downtown Washington opened his door to dozens of peaceful marchers fleeing, as riot police bore down firing chemicals at them. He provided a refuge through the night so they would not be arrested for violating a curfew.

Steven Petrow wrote: “Yes, there is beauty to be found in these dark days, and its name is *kindness*.” He described examples of what he called the “viral nature of *kindness*.” Ramona DeFelice Long, who lives in Newark, Delaware said, “That when her mother, a former nurse, died of the novel coronavirus in April, she asked that “people perform an act of kindness to a nurse in lieu of sending flowers. One person sent lunch to the emergency room unit in a small hospital, and another sent a gift card to a struggling neighborhood medical professional with a family.

The pandemic was bringing out the best in us. But- there always seems to be a “but.” Cynthia Ambres, a black physician in Los Angeles, told how she had witnessed how disparate the pandemic was when it came to her neighborhood, the African American community. Acts of systemic racism were witnessed on television when a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd and three officer’s stood by watching for eight minutes. They did nothing to help as George Floyd was calling out “I can’t breathe,” while being brutally murdered and dying before their very eyes!

Yet kindness may be more important than ever, especially when it comes to listening to people and hearing what causes them pain, anger, sadness- often all at once. These are emotionally and politically challenging times unlike anything that most people have ever experienced.

Why is kindness important, even- maybe especially- from six feet away? Rose Aece a Latin documentarian says she has been deeply affected

by the recent turn of events, but she remains an advocate for ‘kindness:’ which is about empathy and understanding, about recognizing the plight of the person six feet away from you and offering emotional support and advocacy in a moment of anger or despair. Kindness builds bridges, two bridges away. It is the antidote to the walls which we so often build around us that are demonic and destructive.

Last year Professor Jamil Zaki who studies kindness at Stanford University noted, “There’s lots of evidence that our experiences, our choices, our habits, our practices, which are learned experience if not part of our innate biology, go a long way to predict how empathetic we become.” He related that in researching for his book, *“The War of Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World,”* he learned that empathy or kindness is a skill that we can build. He said, “Doing kind things is a crucial project for us both as individuals and as a culture.” We know that is true, now more than ever.

People say that kindness brings kindness, even in small acts like giving a notepad, or a larger action like providing safe refuge for genuine protestors. This is one reason kindness is a way to bolster good mental health in us. Spreading kindness does not mean ignoring the need to protest injustice and killing, like that of David Floyd and so many other innocent people. The world needs to be made fairer, better, and a place of desirable living. Professor Zaki and the people I’ve illustrated create examples of a just and loving world. We need to stay balanced and emotionally solid to face a future that feels very uncertain. In this angry and stressed time, research says we can learn to be kinder.

In April, with the pandemic spreading in her hometown, Kristin Wilson told friends on a ZOOM call that members of their household had been infected with covid-19, the disease caused by coronavirus. After she recovered, she said that neighbors, in response, left flowers and baked goods at her door and called with good wishes.

Kindness is not a cure- our challenges are far too serious, but it is a way of being that can make a difference to those around you. Right now, the biggest act of kindness any of us can do is simple- wear a mask to protect others, if not yourself, respect the social distancing of six feet, so we can all get back to work and life together. Listen, really listen to what people are saying to you. Listen to people who are angry, depressed and in despair.

The most important gift is the grace of faith from Jesus Christ. Faith is there, if we will but clear away the mess in our minds. Kindness and the faith in Jesus Christ is a powerful force. To combat evil, let us follow our Lord: as faithful laborers, going out and bringing in “the plentiful harvest”³ of kindness.

Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. He told them and he tells us. “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”⁴ *Amen.*

³ *ibis.* Matthew 9:37-38

⁴ *ibid.* Matthew 10:1; 10:7

A PRAYER FOR THE HARVEST OF KINDNESS

Let us pray:

Dear God, the life of all who live, the light of the faithful, the strength of those who labor for the harvest of kindness, and the repose of those who have died from the coronavirus: We thank you for the blessings of this day, as we journey on our way, we pray for healing, the peace which passeth understanding, and the freedom with kindness that should prevail throughout your world, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. *Amen.*