

Trinity 19 - 2018

How many of you remember oilcloth?

When I was a boy it was cheap, came in a variety of colours and designs and was often used to cover kitchen tables.

One year in Vacation Bible School, we used oilcloth to make bookmarks to be taken home to mother.

The teacher cut out the material in the shape of gothic, stained-glass windows. We students then pasted onto these strips Bible verses. Mine was: “**Be ye kind,**” the very verse with which today’s Epistle ends.

Later, I would go on to learn the whole verse:

“And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

But, as a young child, “Be ye kind” told me everything I needed to know.

This morning I wish to speak to you on the subject of the amazing power of kindness.

But, first, allow me to place this verse in context.

The Church at Ephesus was made up of converts from paganism. As a result, there had to be some ‘unlearning’ as well as some ‘learning’ in that congregation. For example . . .

Those who had been thieves must now learn to support themselves with honest work.

Those who had practiced lying and deceit must now learn to speak the truth.

These who had engaged in immoral sexual practices so common in the ancient Greco-Roman world must now make a clean break with such things. “Lasciviousness” is the word the King James’ uses to describe these practices.

And Paul rounds off his list with the positive command to be kind.

If you have been watching television this past week, kindness seems to be a forgotten virtue, at least in the political arena.

Ranker, malice, vilification and evil-speaking seem to be the order of the day.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we who call ourselves Christians need to make a special effort to model this forgotten virtue.

If you think about it, Jesus Himself was the great exemplar of kindness.

Oh yes, he could be tough when he needed to be. He was a man's man. Remember what he did with the money changers in the Temple. He overturned their tables and drove them out. No sissy man could have done that.

Nevertheless, most of the snapshots we have of Him portray another side: a man of integrity and firmness – yes – but also one of compassion and immense kindness.

Think, for example, how he handled the women caught in the act of adultery.

Her male accusers wanted to stone her, but Jesus wanted to save her. After they had slunk away, came His words: "Go and sin no more."

We are not told, but I can't help but believe, these words of kindness changed her life. She went away with her shoulders up, a new dignity, a new purpose, to say nothing of cleansed slate.

Or what about Jesus' response to the paralysed man laid at his feet in today's Gospel?

Kindness prompted Him not only to heal this man's bodily infirmity – his paralysis -- but also to address the deeper needs of the heart. Addressing the latter first, He said: "**Son, your sins are forgiven.**" Then, went on to say: "**Take up your bed and walk.**"

Again, I can't help but believe Jesus' kind words that day changed the trajectory of this man's life.

If kindness was Jesus' way, surely it ought to be our way. That is what Paul is saying today's key verse.

Again, I want to suggest that there is amazing power in kindness. A story told by a seminary professor makes this point very powerfully.

This professor, according to some 'tellings', was none other than the late Fred Craddock (who, by the way, has spoken from this very pulpit).

If it wasn't, it should have been, because it sounds like one of his stories.

Regardless, this professor and his wife had taken few days off and had headed for the Smoky Mountains. That evening they went to a restaurant in Gatlinburg.

Once seated, they saw a white-headed gentleman making the rounds of the tables, greeting and making small talk with the patrons.

Secretly, they hoped he would miss their table, but here he came.

"Where are you folks from?" he asked.

"Oklahoma," they answered.

What do you do there?

"Oh, I teach in a seminary."

"Oh, you teach preacher boys, do you? Let me tell you a preacher story." He then pulled out a chair and sat down with them at the table.

This professor had heard about all the preacher stories he wanted to hear, but there was no way out from hearing this one.

The old man pointed his finger in the direction of the plate-glass window in the front of the restaurant, and said:

“See that yonder mountain. I was born just on the other side of it. I had it rough go of it as boy. My mother was not married when I was born, and her disgrace fell on me.

“I can remember hearing old women whispering as we walked down the street: ‘I wonder who’s his daddy?’”

He went on to say that he and his mother did not go to church. Church was for good people, not people like them.

But, eventually a new preacher came into town, and spoke at a school assembly.

“For some reason,” the old man said, “I felt drawn to him. He seemed so kind.”

“So, I began to slip into his church, always waiting until the service had begun and always being careful to slip out before the Benediction.

“But one day, I didn’t get out in time,” he continued “and had to file past the preacher at the back door.

“Looking down at me with piercing blue eyes, he said: ‘Whose boy are you?’”

Of course, this was the question he had been dreading all his life, and tears began to well up in his eyes.

The old preacher could see his distress, and quickly said:

“Wait a minute. Don’t tell me. I know whose son you are. You are God’s son. God is your daddy.

Patting his hand on his shoulder, he said:

“Boy, you have a great heritage. I want you to go out and claim it.”

“Those words changed my life,” said the old man as he pushed back his chair, got up and walked away from the table.

When he had left, the professor asked the waitress who that man was. She said:

“Oh, you don’t know? That’s Ben Hooper, twice governor of Tennessee.”

A few kind words had rearranged history.

Not everyone can be a great preacher, or gifted teacher, or do heroic acts, but everyone can be kind. ///

And in the end, just perhaps, this is the best and most powerful thing any of us can do.

“Be ye kind.” I wonder whatever became of that little oilcloth bookmark?