

February 16, 2020
Rev. Kerry Smith

Matthew 5:21-24
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

What Does the Lord Require? Love kindness

Matthew 5:21-24 New Revised Standard Version

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

It was Valentine’s Day just a few days ago and over the weekend I officiated a wedding at Perkins Chapel at SMU. One of the things that I talk about in my premarital counseling is psychologist John Gottman’s research about the four most damaging behaviors to marital success. Gottman says that criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness create emotional distance instead of emotional intimacy. Have you ever seen two married people and you’re not sure if they even like each other anymore? Love is a decision at the basic level to be kind to the other person. To wake up every morning and treat the other person like you want to be treated.

The other week in the Tuesday Pray, Read, Grow group, we all held hands and prayed. Keitrah Snider prayed aloud and her words were powerful to me. She said, “Jesus, I’m determined to be like you and not hate. Help.” We are looking at Micah 6:8, the Bible verse that is on the front cover of your bulletin. “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Last week we talked about doing justice, and today we are looking at loving kindness. Justice and kindness. It seems like those are opposed to one another. Justice is about the right ordering of society and kindness is about love. In justice God punishes the wicked and defends the innocent but in kindness God forgives the wicked. The wicked! We can do justice and work against unjust laws but loving kindness means that we love the people who wrote the unjust laws and are enforcing them. Loving the wicked is not easy.

We abhor people who take different positions from us. Here’s the thing. We can make our world look just like us. We can only associate with people that we like and that we agree with, but what are we going to do about Jesus? Jesus keeps reaching out and bringing the ‘wrong’ people into our lives. There are good people who love God and also have an opposite political view than you. My friend Eric Folkerth, the pastor at Kessler Park UMC, put on facebook this week, “I’d rather attend church with messed up people who love God, than religious people who dislike messed up people.” Loving kindness is loving all of the messed up people in our lives. It is loving passionately as God loves. Our call is to influence hatred, not to contribute to it. We are broken and we are called to walk alongside others who are broken. We have to have conversations with people with whom we disagree.

Let me share with you Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. They are printed in your bulletin if you want to follow along. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Jesus' words make me uncomfortable. You have heard don't murder but if you are angry with your brother or sister it is like you are guilty of murder. Call a brother idiot and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Yell stupid at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. If you are going to church and about to make an offering when you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

Jesus expects more of us than basic decency. You can't even be angry. It is a picture for us of what a full life in Jesus is like. Jesus is describing a way of life that is most life-giving for everyone in the community. Imagine when we encounter someone who ruffles all of our feathers, if we were able to start with compassion. Maybe someone's anger is masking the pain that is in their life? If we can imagine that we are only seeing 2% of their reality and maybe the other 98% of them is just trying to hold everything in their life together.

Preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber says she is dabbling in compassion. She has been trying to notice how it feels in her body when she is in a place of compassion towards someone, and how it feels when she is lacking compassion.¹ This practicing compassion is something that she needs to do for her own self, not for the other person. Having compassion and loving kindness for others who we feel are in the wrong, or who have hurt us, or who are mean, only comes to us because of the grace of God.

In his book *Road to Character*, author David Brooks tells a story about Dorothy Day. David Brooks loves Dorothy Day! Dorothy Day was a devout Catholic servant and activist for the poor. Dorothy Day fell in love with a man named Forster Batterham, but they never married. Forster lived for many years with another woman named Nanette. Thirty years after Forster left Dorothy Day, Nanette was struck with cancer. Forster called on his old friend Dorothy, who ministered to Nanette as she died. While Forster was absent, for several months Dorothy spent much of each day with Nanette, who often cried out in pain. Dorothy Day showed up and provided a ministry of presence. She did practical things like making lunch, dusting the room, washing the towels. Dorothy Day practiced a passive activism. She didn't worry about solving something that cannot be solved. She gave Nanette dignity and she sat with her through the nights of pain and darkness.² While she could have resented Nanette for taking away the man she loved, she opened her heart and showed kindness to this woman. And she didn't just do it for a day or two, she did it for months.

To love kindness can also be translated love mercy and it is more than being nice. Though, being nice is a good thing. To love kindness means responding to God's love by showing concern and care for others. Being kind isn't always easy. We get busy and frustrated, our children disappoint us, our spouse is imperfect. A friend doesn't fulfill a promise or the preacher says something that offends you.³

Have you ever asked God to bless the person that you love to hate? Ask God to help you choose to meet hate with the force of love. When we have no compassion, God does. God sees as beautiful that which we call ugly. God says that everybody starts with 100 points. When we struggle to love others, we can ask that God teach us how to see the image of God in that person. We can ask God to help us to see that everybody starts with 100 points. We have to let go of our

¹https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/im-dabbling-in-compassion?r=3dw94&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&utm_source=copy

² David Brooks. *Road to Character*. pp. 100–101

³ <https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/021217.html>

resentments. We have to forgive ourselves and others. I give thanks that God reaches into the graves that we dig for ourselves and God loves us back to life.⁴

It's a mess down here. Our country is divided, neighbor against neighbor, world-view against world-view, and we are so sure we are right and they are wrong. Dylan Marron has a podcast called Conversations with People who hate me which I highly recommend. He says empathy isn't endorsement. We can choose to meet hate with the force of love, but love doesn't cooperate with injustice. Love isn't passive. We do not have to give up what we believe in to be kind.

In Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, she says "Seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem. The fact that the meaning of race may evolve over time or lose much of its significance is hardly a reason to be struck blind. We should hope not for a colorblind society but instead for a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love. That was Martin Luther King's dream – a society that is capable of seeing each of us, as we are, with love. That is a goal worth fighting for."

Every single person in this world bears the image of God in them and we should want wholeness, happiness, peace, safety, and rest for them. Sometimes it is kinder to love someone from across the room but our heart should break when someone else is hurting. We should care about people, all people, not just those with whom we agree. And we should care in an up close and personal way. Loving kindness is not aloof. It is where we are, right now. That is what loving kindness means.⁵ God's kingdom already is taking root and growing among us. Even when it feels small, God's light is spreading. God has enough compassion for the road ahead and that is enough.⁶ Let's go out into the world determined to be like Jesus. Thanks be to God, Amen.

⁴ Much of this paragraph adapted from https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/im-dabbling-in-compassion?r=3dw94&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&utm_source=copy

⁵ <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2020/01/06/christians-are-supposed-to-care-about-people/>

⁶ Much of this paragraph adapted from https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/im-dabbling-in-compassion?r=3dw94&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&utm_source=copy