

“Kindness in an Age of Contempt”
Sermon Series on Fresh Produce #6

Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes

First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC

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(1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Introduction.

Dr. Seuss is among the latest famous figures who find themselves trending in a negative direction on social media and declared “over,” joining the hordes of celebrity casualties of what is known as Cancel Culture in 2021. Along with comedian Jimmy Fallon, author J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame, and even the Disney cartoon character Pepe Le Pew, the hits just keep coming.

I get it that times have changed, and we need to realize that some things we once thought were okay to think or say we now realize are inappropriate, but it seems that our culture has developed a rather toxic level of contempt these days, and it’s tearing us apart. We see expressions of it all around us on social media, television, and in the news, and it’s making us miserable. It’s also keeping us from flourishing as a society.

How can we change this? What’s the antidote to all the negativity and contempt we see and feel around us these days? And how does Jesus want us as followers of Christ to live in a way that is counter to the culture of contempt? I think the key lies in the Fruit of the Spirit kindness.

I. The Spiritual Fruit of Kindness.

When we think of the word “kindness,” the images that probably come to mind are people like our kindergarten teachers, or perhaps our grandmothers, or maybe even the mom and dad on the *Brady Bunch* TV show. Now, don’t get me wrong. That’s not all bad. These are nice images. But that’s actually part of the problem, isn’t it? In our world, being kind sounds a lot like just being nice, and being nice doesn’t appear to help you get ahead in this world. In fact, it might even hurt your chances. “Nice guys finish last” is how the old saying goes. To many of us kindness sounds rather weak, lightweight, and timid.

However, when we consider kindness from a biblical point of view, what we’re talking about here is more than just being nice. Kindness as a Fruit of the Spirit is a divinely empowered virtue that is actually quite powerful, and, as you will see later on, in many ways it’s rather subversive. It is sometimes so unexpected, and even undeserved, that it can catch a person off guard and penetrate their defenses.

The word that is translated “kindness” in the passage we’ve read this morning is the Greek word *chrestotes*. Unlike our English word “kindness,” it doesn’t just refer to a kind gesture or action. Rather, it describes a person’s inner disposition. It might generally be translated as “a generous temperament or a grace which pervades the whole of one’s nature so that it softens all that would be harsh, selfish, and austere in a person.”

Any expression of divinely inspired kindness is rooted in the kindness of God, and throughout Scripture we read of the way in which God demonstrated His love for us through His loving kindness. For example, in Titus 3 we read where Paul writes, *“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy” (Titus 3:3-5).* What we find when we study the Bible is that the kindness God expects of His children is the very kindness He has shown us in Christ.

In the Old Testament there is a Hebrew word that on occasion is also translated “kindness,” and it, too, is a difficult word to translate. It’s the Hebrew word *hesed*. No single word in English can convey the whole meaning of *hesed*, so we attempt to express what is being said with phrases like “steadfast love,” “covenantal love,” and “loving kindness.” An example of this is in the book of Lamentations 3:22 where it says, *“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end.”* “Steadfast love” is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed* which can also be translated “kindness.”

There is nothing in us that deserves the kindness of God. It is His unmerited grace and favor, and it doesn’t come as a result of who we are or what we’ve done, but because of who God is and what He did for us in Christ on the cross. And Scripture tells us that you and I are now invited to be channels of God’s loving kindness to others, and each of us has the opportunity every single day to reject the temptation of power and bitterness and instead choose to express God’s loving kindness to another person who doesn’t deserve it any more than we do. Whether it’s a rebellious child or a bitter ex-husband, an angry driver or a demanding boss, every time we choose to respond with kindness instead of anger and contempt, we participate in the loving kindness of God, and we share in His ministry of reconciliation and hope.

This doesn’t mean we should become co-dependent or enable bad behavior. Sometimes the kindest and loving thing we can do is speak truth into a person’s life and hold them accountable for the things they say and do. And yet to be a channel of God’s loving kindness to others when they don’t deserve it is to reject the desire to be bitter or to get even. We can leave justice in the hands of God, who is in a much better position than we are to sort things out, and we can look to Him to be our defender. When we’re channels of God’s kindness in the world, we create hope and healing, and the rippling effect can be dramatic.

The passage we’ve read this morning in 1 Corinthians 13 is a classic description of the way in which a follower of Jesus is to express God’s loving kindness toward others. And it doesn’t just refer to marriage. *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (13:4-7).*

When was the last time someone was kind like that toward you? And when was the last time you expressed that sort of kindness toward another person, especially toward someone who didn’t really deserve it? You don’t have to be a social scientist to realize the world is a harsh and cruel place. Read the latest news feed or check your social media of choice, and you will find all sorts of problems. Marriages are falling apart, children are being bullied at school, and in the workplace it seems that people will do just about anything to get ahead these days.

The world is a severe and unrelenting place. In a world like that, it's natural to see everyone turning inward and people becoming self-protective, self-promoting, and self-preserving. This is when the Fruit of the Spirit of kindness becomes very powerful, and it can undermine the cruelty of the world.

II. Examples of Kindness.

What does the Fruit of the Spirit look like in real life? There are many examples in Scripture to which we could point that give us a picture of what the kindness of God's people is to look like in the world. There is David who showed kindness to Mephibosheth who was the grandson of David's greatest enemy Saul. Even though Mephibosheth posed a threat to David because of his claim to the throne by virtue of his lineage to the former king, David followed through on his promise to his friend Jonathan to show kindness to Saul's descendants.

I also think of Joseph who acted kindly toward his brothers who had sold him into slavery instead of getting even and punishing them. I think of Boaz who had pity of Ruth, and he became her kinsman redeemer out of kindness. And then there is the example of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. In the story we see how Christ emphasized that acts of kindness aren't something we simply express toward people who are like us and those who are easy to love. It's something we're supposed to extend to people who are different from us and even who we might perceive to be our enemies. Sometimes kindness requires courage, and we see an example of that when Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body so He and Nicodemus could give Christ a proper burial.

In our day you might say that Mr. Rogers was the patron saint of kindness. Behind the cardigan sweater and behind all the puppets and the simple catchy songs, there was a deep and abiding message of kindness that was rooted in his faith as a Christian. Many people don't know that Fred Rogers was actually a Presbyterian minister, and he felt God's call to broadcast kindness and grace through the medium of television as a way of counteracting all the negativity he saw in the brokenness of the world.

Fred Rogers once said, "There are three ways to ultimate success. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind." He also said, "Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us, as a matter of course, simply spoke just one kind word to another person every day."

At First Pres we may not have Mr. Rogers, but we do have Mr. Bo Brookby. He's one of the kindest people I've ever met, and his walk with Jesus translates into a life of kindness. Every time I've ever heard Bo pray, he always adds, "And Lord, help us do something kind for someone today." And Bo puts his prayer into practice, and he lives it out in his own life daily.

When I think of examples of kindness, I also think of Dr. J. Christy Wilson. He was my professor of missions in seminary, and he and his wife, Betty, were missionaries in Afghanistan. In 1974 they were ordered out of the country by the Muslim government, and then the authorities decreed that the little church building they had constructed should be destroyed. The morning the bulldozers showed up for the scheduled demolition, the members of the church greeted the workers with a smile and served them tea and cookies as they leveled the building. It was an act of grace, and the workers didn't know how to respond. They were blown away by the kindness of the members of that little church. (By the way, the workers

were also ordered by the government officials to dig down 10 feet below the foundation, because they had heard there might be an underground church! They didn't understand.)

How about you? As a practice and a prayer for the coming week, would you be willing to begin each morning by praying, "Help me be kind this day, dear Lord," and then make it your aim to go out of your way to do something kind for someone that day? Then at the end of the day, I suggest that you take an inventory and notice how your kindness impacted other people and how it impacted you. I think you will be amazed.

III. The Subversive Power of Kindness.

Kindness is powerfully subversive, and it can catch the world by surprise. Last week I read a story about a man named Julio Diaz that I can't get out of my mind. Julio is a 31-year-old social worker who lives in the Bronx, and every night he has a regular evening routine. He ends his hour-long commute back from the city to his apartment one stop early so he can get off and go to a diner. This diner has become his regular dinner spot.

One night Julio stepped off the Number 6 train onto a nearly empty platform, and his evening took an unexpected turn. As he walked toward the stairs, a teenaged boy approached him and pulled out a knife. Julio gave the boy his wallet and said, "Here you go." As the boy left, Julio called out, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep warm." Then Julio continued, "You know, all I wanted to do was go get dinner, and if you want to join me, hey, you're more than welcome."

The stunned teenager accepted Julio's offer, so they went to the diner Julio frequents. Once they got seated, the manager, the servers, and the other staff came by to say "hi" to Julio, and the boy was surprised again. He said, "Man, you know everybody here. You're even nice to the dishwasher. I didn't think people actually behaved that way." So Julio asked the boy, "What is it that you want out of life?" The teenager sat there not knowing what to say.

When the bill came, Julio said to the boy, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill, because you've got my money. But if you give me back my wallet, I'll gladly pay and treat you." The boy handed the wallet back, and Julio took out a twenty-dollar bill and gave it to the boy. And then he asked the teenager for his knife in return, to which the boy complied. In Julio's words, "I figure if you treat people right, you can only hope that they will treat you right, too. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."¹

You know, when I hear Julio's story, I don't think he was being nice. I think he was tapping into the power of kindness, which is much stronger than just being nice. Kindness is a jujitsu response to the harshness of the world which refuses to forcefully oppose the attack of the enemy, but instead uses the momentum of the attacker's energy against them. It's the art of softness. It's the kind of strength that chooses to believe something can be gained when we respond to the harsh world not with greater harshness but with counterintuitive kindness.

A natural question we might ask is, "What happened to the kid after this encounter. Did it change his life?" *What if it didn't?* You see, I'm not convinced the story is really about that teenager. I think the story is about Julio. I begin to picture this young man living in a city of twenty million people and how he could walk into a nondescript diner at the end of the day and be welcomed like he owns the place—by the manager, the wait staff, and the dishwasher. People who treat others with kindness not only soften the harshness of the world of those

around them, but I think they also find their own world becoming a kinder and more beautiful place.

Conclusion.

How will you act in kindness toward others in the coming week? In what ways is God calling you to be a channel of His kindness toward someone else today? Ultimately, to be kind is to choose to be selfless. It's the desire to put someone else ahead of yourself, and you sacrifice your needs for the sake of another.

It can start with a smile, or when you hold the elevator. You can bring a coworker a cup of coffee or help someone carry a heavy object. You can allow another driver to merge in traffic, or you can write a note. You can pick up litter or call your parents. You can patiently wait your turn or hold your tongue when you want to say something mean. Or you can express appreciation to a waitperson or retail employees. I try to remember the names of people who wait on me and thank them by name at the end of a meal. There are a million ways you can express kindness to another person and become a channel of God's grace to them. Put into your daily practice the prayer I suggested and determine to do one random act of kindness for someone each day this week and see what a difference it makes in your life. I close with this.

A man and his wife were awakened at 3 o'clock in the morning by a loud pounding on the door. The man got up and went to the door where a drunken stranger, standing in the pouring rain, asked him for a push. "Not a chance," said the husband, "It is 3 o'clock in the morning!" And he slammed the door and returned to bed.

"Who was that?" asked his wife. "Just some drunk asking for a push," he answered. "Did you help him?" She asked. "No, I did not. It's 3 o'clock in the morning, and it is pouring rain out there!" "Well, you have a short memory," said his wife. "Can't you remember, about three months ago when we broke down, and those two guys helped us? I think you should help him."

The man did as he was told, and he got dressed and went out into the pounding rain. He called out into the dark, "Hello, are you still there?" "Yes" came back the answer. "Do you still need a push?" called out the husband. "Yes, please!" came the reply from the dark. "Where are you?" asked the husband. The drunk replied, "Over here on the swing."

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Friends, go bear some fruit for God today. Amen.

¹ This story is adapted from the NPR program *Story Core*.