

## “Kindness”

Psalm 34; I Peter 3:8,9; II Peter 1:7

Some years ago, I said to a very pious and very mean old man, irate with his teen-age son: “Why don’t you try kindness? – you’ve tried everything else.”

Peter was also addressing a **similarly** troublesome bunch of church folk when he wrote: “add kindness and love.” (II Peter 1:7). It was sort of a recipe for the Christian life. But as anyone can tell you, it is a hard recipe to follow. Now strangely enough, piety toward God always seems easier for us Puritan types than “kindness and love”; we staunch Calvinists find any display of affection difficult, even toward family and friends, not to speak of the “riff-raff,” as H.L. Mencken called them, milling around outside the closed circle of those we accept.

Piety, on the other hand, seems simple enough to us, for we are inclined to restrict it to the eleven o’clock Presbyterian Service of Sunday Worship: just a few prayers, a bit of harmless scripture, an ancient creed, an innocuous sermon, like the present one, and a familiar hymn or two, all calculated to create a rather pleasant euphoria for the faithful few.

But, if true religion really requires something more than slipping into the Sunday meeting unnoticed and out again without speaking to anyone, especially to “you know who”; if religion really does require that second step – that “kindness and love” bit toward “all types”? – well, some of us might just as well count ourselves out, for we simply are not the affectionate sort. “Loving kindness and tender mercy” may be O.K. for God, but it is hardly one of our characteristics – and that’s that! After all, our families have had to learn how to carry on without any great display of affection from us. Our friends don’t expect it any more. We heckle them when we please. And as for the great unwashed, out there somewhere – much less our down-right enemies – well, it’s out of the question, of course. If one cannot be religious without all this “brotherly kindness and love” bit, then one simply cannot be religious.

Of course, we know it was easy for Jesus to show compassion for thieves, grieve over lepers, sit down and eat with, one hesitates to mention, all sorts, but look who he was! The Son of God, and look where this foolishness got Him. Killed Him, they did. As for us, why we are only human and want desperately to play it safe. And who will blame us – except God?

Maybe this is why so many of us have a real fear of affection. “Brotherly kindness and love” would involve us with the sickness and sin of other lives, and being afraid of the

messiness, we say, “Stay away.” We rationalize our own insecurity, and we say, “All this Christian sweetness and light stuff is strictly for the birds – the St. Francises and the Don Quixotes of the world. At least, it’s not for me. I’m the tough, no-nonsense type. Deliver me from those bleeding hearts and gentle people, with their simpering smiles, their do-goodism. I can’t stand it!”

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Now, if this is the way some of us feel, I don’t think Peter will understand us, if we ever do have to face him. For Peter himself was a big, warm-hearted, kindly fellow, who loved his wife and his fishing and his friends, who had his temper and his temptations, but was never afraid of affection. Indeed, it was his saving grace. His speech denied his Christ, but his heart, ah, his heart, brought him back: “Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.” And it was true. He was later to give his life for his friend, and no greater love hath any man than this.

It is sad – and strange – that so many of us think to show any kindly emotion is a sign of weakness. Why do some of us like to pretend we’re all brain or all brawn and have very little heart? Being human (that is, being made in the image of God), we all do have a heart. We only make ourselves and others miserable trying to stifle our kindly impulses.

Maybe we fear affection for a variety of reasons. For example, we may be afraid to show “brotherly kindness and love” because we tried once and were rebuffed, rejected, ridiculed, so we’re afraid to try again. We say to Life: “You’ve hurt me once, Life, old boy; I’ll never let you hurt me again!” But what we actually are saying is, “I’ll never try to live again.” And that’s a very sad state.

Or, it may be that some of us mistrust kindness because we’ve been exposed to false sentiment: the “I dearly love and adore you” song and dance that was only a routine, that did not stand the test of the first serious problem. So we tell ourselves we will not be fooled again – wife of husband, “he’s an old gusher, but he’s not Old Faithful.” But if Jesus had felt this way toward Peter, and he certainly had every right to, he would have left his best friend behind – his best man would have been lost to him.

Some of us, again, fear “brotherly kindness and love,” because, somewhere, early in life, we have experienced an excess of it, an overwhelming kindness that seemed to smother us in sticky molasses, a parental love that seemed to take away our independence (“let Daddie do it, dear” or “Mommie will mop it up for ‘oou.’”) and this excess made either permanent infants (so

that at middle age we are still wondering, “Oh, where, oh, where has my dear Dad gone?” and we can never, never get it into our heads, “He’s dead, little boy, and you’re on your own.”) or either this: too much smother-love has made us rebels who never more want to be helped, protected, pampered, cooed over, by anyone, any time, anywhere, ever! (“Get away from me – your kindness makes me ill – I want so much to be alone!”)

Let me say this: if you try to work with – or stay married to -- either the permanent infant or the permanent rebel, you’re in trouble. The wrong sort of affection somewhere along the line, has done them in. Yet Jesus never allowed the over-possessiveness of his family to fracture his own maturity. He pointed to a mob of strangers who needed him, and said to his own astonished folks, who wanted to take him safely away, “here are my mother and my brothers.” He knew he could not go home again – he never tried – yet he ever maintained a love of home and kin; at his death, he sought to protect his mother, who had sought in her own pathetic way to protect him.

O, yes, he was a kind one, our Lord, so kind even Romans called him God’s good son. Over and over again, in the New Testament you will read, “and Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched and healed them.” He was never afraid of “brotherly kindness and love.”

And his “compassion on the multitude” was consistent. His disciples may have been on-again, off-again, like some of us, but not the Christ. His kindness could be depended on. Some of us distrust affection because we’ve been exposed to the type that runs hot and cold without reason. I remember a college boy who said, “I can never depend on my parents’ attitude. On Monday they may act ‘sweet as pie’ and then on Tuesday, freeze up and won’t listen or flare up without reason. I never really know why I’m being accepted or being rejected. So I’ve never known if the people I’ve loved were my friend or my foe. My folks’ affection is unpredictable.” And this was being carried over in his attitude toward his fiancée. He thought her laughter affected when it wasn’t, her tears crocodile when they were real. You see, he had grown up around falsified feelings and couldn’t bring himself to trust “kindness and love.” He had to learn, like a child learning to walk for the first time, or like a patient learning to walk again after long illness. And she led him – by the hand – to trust in kindness.

You see, in spite of whatever our past experience may be, there is a deep and hungry need in this world for good, honest affection, for kindness of heart. It is something no Christian can be without, for it was never lacking in the Christ.

Have you noticed – that the word “kindness” is dropping out the modern vocabulary?, as though, as though with all our enlightened gadgetry, we didn’t need it, when, God knows, we need it more and more.

Again and again and again, I have talked with couples, who think they are falling out of love, who need nothing in all the world so much as -- money? No; mediation? No; only kindness, just to be kind to one another, to quit cutting at each other, and in a thousand small ways, “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another,” as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven us all. “That best portion of a good man’s life, -- his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness.” (William Wordsworth – Tintern Abbey, 1798) {Aside:} husband ill – wife says, “Oh I love him!” Why do you love him so? “He’s the kindest man I’ve ever known.”

Simple, Christ-like kindness would solve a great many of our family problems. But, as always, it is, for most, unbelievable. We will so seldom try kindness. We are, we are, too proud. And, and, too fearful.

(“For them, there is no kindness in the Apostle’s Creed”) But kindness is in the Christian creed, at the heart of the gospel of God’s redeeming love, at the heart of the cross of Christ.

So Peter wrote to the Church, “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and an humble mind. Do not return evil for evil, or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary, bless, for to this you have been called, that you many obtain a blessing.” Amen.

March 14, 1965