

A Kindness that Matters, as the Anti-Nice
July 12th: Feast Day of St. Veronica, Patron Saint of Kindness

By James Schlett and Lisanne Jensen

“Let your kindness be known to all people.”
Philippians 4:5

Kindness matters. For St. Paul in the New Testament, it is an imperative. He does not say we *should* be kind; rather, “Let your kindness be known to all people” (Philippians 4:5) and “Be kind to one another, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

With this imperative, we are called to be kind. But what is kindness? Paul told the Corinthians, “Love is patient and kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4), but that does not shed much light on kindness. Consequently, when we declare that “kindness matters,” we run the risk of thinking we must simply be nice.

No.

Being kind is not the same as being nice, passive, or harmless. We are called to be Christians, not kittens. In fact, kindness is the anti-nice. The call to kindness should stir as much fear, trembling, and courage as the call to bear our own cross as Christ did.

Before delving into the meaning of kindness, we must understand why it is not nice (and is the opposite). Today, “nice” is understood to mean polite and kind as well as pleasing or agreeable, according to Webster’s dictionary. But when the term is examined etymologically, being nice is clearly often counterintuitive to those who practice it. “Nice” finds its root in the Latin *nescius*, which combines *ne* (“not”) with *scire* (“to know”). So, to be nice means “to not know,” as in to be ignorant or unaware. When lies are not met with truth, or when a blind eye is turned to dishonesty for the sake of being nice and not making waves, that is anything but love or kindness – or “lovingkindness,” which in Hebrew translates to *hesed*.

The story of Jonah’s ending shows God’s kindness and illustrates how the combination of love and kindness necessitates an action: lovingkindness (*hesed*).¹ After being swallowed by and delivered from the whale and obeying God’s charge to warn the people of Nineveh about their wickedness, Jonah felt angry that the Lord did not destroy them after their repentance. Frustrated, Jonah ventured to a place outside the city to see what would happen to it. God created a leafy plant to cast shade on Jonah and shield him from the blazing sun as he waited, but the next morning a worm devoured it.

Without that plant, Jonah roasted in the sun and grew faint and more frustrated. But God said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be

concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:10-11). The psychologist Erich Fromm noted that God here explained to Jonah that the essence of love requires our labor (tending) to make something grow – whether a plant or city, a friend or stranger. Fromm concludes, "Love is the active concern for life and the growth of that which we love."²

As God shows Jonah, kindness matters because it leads to growth: personal, familial, and communal. But to understand what kindness is and how it helps others grow, the Greek word *chréstotés* is instructive. Paul wrote his letters in Greek, and *chréstotés* translates to *hesed* in Hebrew.³ In English, it means kindness, goodness, excellence, gentleness, or uprightness.⁴ Not many of these English translations of *chréstotés* tell us *how* to be kind, except for *uprightness*, which signifies being erect. It has a vertical orientation that points upward.

The Hebrew word for uprightness, *yasar*, also gives us direction: straight.⁵ That is why the palm tree, which grows straight up, is a symbol for the upright (*yasar*).⁶ The psalmist says, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree ... proclaiming, "The Lord is upright" (Psalm 92: 12-15). What an even deeper significance, then, as adoring crowds used palm branches to honor Jesus when he triumphantly entered Jerusalem and shouted of his righteousness: "Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9)

Kindness, then, involves aligning oneself and others with God, truth, and love. In kindness, we lead people to truth rather than accepting or affirming the lies that others believe and want us to believe – and with which we often unwittingly agree for the sake of being nice. As Paul told the Romans, "God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance." (Romans 2:4). Despite its best intentions, niceness can lead us astray, and those "who have left the straight paths ... walk in dark ways" (Proverbs 2:13).

Think about one teacher who ignores (*nescius*) a student's mistakes and flatters his or her work. Then, think of another teacher who shakes the student's sense of self, or self-sufficiency, by unveiling the truths about certain shortcomings or misconceptions in his or her work. One teacher is stifling the student's development as a writer, musician, or mathematician out of a self-centered niceness while the other fosters his or her growth out of a kindness that may initially create tension between the two. As economist Thomas Sowell said, "When you want to help people, you tell them the truth. When you want to help yourself, you tell them what they want to hear."

If people cannot accept the truth about themselves or the world, they cannot be healed. The miracle of Jesus's kindness was not that he magically healed the sick but that he saw them as they were and forgave them. He showed them the truth about themselves and the world. There is a reason why Jesus repeatedly says, "I tell you the truth" in the Gospels – 78 times.⁷ In doing so, he helped them accept themselves even though they were unacceptable. He showed them grace, taught them faith.

As the Protestant "catholic" theologian Paul Tillich noted, the paralytic at the pool regained his health after Jesus forgave his sins (John 5: 1-15). "The man lived in an inner struggle with

himself, with his feeling of guilt," Tillich said. "Out of this conflict his illness had grown; and now when Jesus forgives him, he feels reconciled with himself and the world; he becomes whole and healthy. There is little in our recent psychology of depth that surpasses these insights in truth and depth." That is why Tillich calls faith "... a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms us and heals us."⁸

All too often, niceness separates us from God and leads us astray and further into estrangement, whereas kindness leads us and those we love toward Him. In being kind, we must be gentle, but we may not always be agreeable. Tension may be unavoidable, but it can be subtle at our kindest. Kindness gently wields truth as a cure, not as a club for beating those who are "wrong." As David said in one of the psalms, "Let a righteous man strike me – that is a kindness; let him rebuke me – that is oil on my head" (Psalms 141: 5).

To be kind, sometimes a gentle rebuke is necessary – or sometimes it is better to say nothing and lead through example. In being kind, we model God's goodness and not only declare it. Paul says, "Let your kindness be known to all people." People should know our kindness through our actions, though our lovingkindness, our *hesed*, our *chréstotés*. Joseph's last words to the Pharaoh's cup bearer before he was released from the prison in which they both had been enchained was, "Remember me and show me kindness" (Genesis 40:14). While the cup holder initially forgot the kindness Joseph demonstrated in interpreting his dream, he later remembered Joseph when the Pharaoh had troubling dreams. That led to Joseph's release and his rise to authority in Egypt, which enabled him to save the tribes of Israel from famine.

July 12th is the feast day of St. Veronica, the patron saint of kindness for wiping the sweat off Christ's brow as he journeyed toward the cross to be crucified. This was no trifle action. At the time, Jesus was being cursed and mocked by the mob around him. Veronica, however, did not partake in the lies that the Pharisees spread about Jesus and that the people in the crowd accepted. The Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, "The simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie. One word of truth outweighs the world."⁹ St. Veronica's act of kindness toward Jesus was this very simple step.

With countless stories of saintly grand-scale miracles and martyrdoms, kindness might sometimes seem like a lofty, unattainable goal. Kindness, however, is beyond measure and not a one-time act: it mirrors God's love for us and puts that love into action. Kindness also helps draw us closer in relationship with God. We must allow God to use us right where we are, as St. Veronica bravely stepped out among shouting crowds and Roman soldiers to wipe Jesus's face. The name "Veronica" comes from *vera icona* — Latin for "true image." The image of Jesus' face appeared on the cloth that she used, hence the meaning of her name – but she also acted in God's image when she displayed this kindness. She dared to look past her own safety to give comfort, compassion, and dignity during intense suffering. We are called to do the same.

The stories of both Joseph and St. Veronica demonstrate how entire kingdoms, whether in heaven or on earth, are built on the smallest acts of kindness. Kingdoms need kindness -- and ours now more than ever. Kindness matters.

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Notes

¹ Howard Silverman, "The Virtue of Hesed," *Kesher Journal*, August 11, 2021,

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² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harperperennial, 2006 (originally published 1956): 25-26.

³ John W. Ritenbaugh, "What the Bible says about Chrestotes," Bible Tools (from Forerunner Commentary),

<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/1646/Chrestotes.htm>

⁴ Bible Hub, "chréstotés," Strong's Concordance, <https://biblehub.com/greek/5544.htm>

⁵ Bible Study Tools, "Upright, Uprightness," Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology,

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/upright-uprightness.html>

⁶ Jim Gerrish, "Walking In Uprightness," Word of God Today (originally in *Bridges For Peace*, Jerusalem, 1998),

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⁷ ChristianPure, "Truth in the Bible: How Often is it Discussed?" May 27, 2024,

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⁸ Paul Tillich, "On Healing," in *The New Being*. New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1955: 38.

⁹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. Sun. 30 Jun 2024.

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