



Sunday, October 20, 2024

***Do Unto Others* Kindness Campaign: RESPECT**

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T” | Matthew 5:43-48, Romans 12:9-21 | Jess Scholten

Our Scripture passage this morning will – hopefully – sound familiar – Matthew’s version of what we heard a few weeks ago from Luke. Let us listen for God’s message for us this morning:

Jesus said: <sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for [God] makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Piero Ferrucci, author of, *The Power of Kindness: The Unexpected Benefits of Leading a Compassionate Life*, tells a Middle Eastern fable:

A man feels oppressed by his family – his wife torments him – his children make fun of him. He feels like a constant victim and decides it’s time for him to go away and find Heaven. On his journey, he consults an old sage who provides very specific and lengthy directions on how to reach Heaven, indicating that the man will have to walk a very long time but will eventually arrive.

He walks and walks, exhausted every night. But he doesn’t want to lose his way, so each night, before he sleeps, he points his shoes in the direction of Heaven. But one night a mischievous devil waits until he is asleep and points the shoes in the opposite direction. Unwittingly, the man now is going back in the direction from which he came, day after day, until soon the scenery looks more and more familiar to him, eventually

landing him in the town he has always lived.

“How much like my old town Paradise looks!” But since it is Paradise, he feels good there and likes it immensely. He sees his old house, which he thinks is Paradise: “How it looks like my old house!” But since it is Paradise, he finds it very enjoyable. His wife and his children greet him: “How they look like my wife and children! Here in Paradise everything looks the way it was before.” However, because it is Paradise, everything is beautiful. His wife is a delightful person, his children are extraordinary – they are full of qualities that he, in his daily life, never would have suspected to exist. “Strange, how here in Paradise everything resembles so precisely what was in my life before, and yet everything is completely different!”

We can do the same experiment in our thinking. We choose a person we know well and we think of all her qualities – not only the ones that are most evident to us from our knowledge of that person, but also those that are potential or barely suggested. Maybe we will be able to intuit the person’s soul, her deepest and most beautiful kernel. To see the soul is to see the true substance of which a person is made, rather than stop at the superficial aspects. (end quote, p 188)

To truly see someone, right at their very core, is to share respect for another. In *The Power of Kindness*, Ferrucci examines this facet of kindness that is respect, reminding us of our humanity. In this way, we too are transformed in our understanding of our lives and of others. In the fable, the man experiences the same people but with very different perspective. Maybe it’s gratitude that makes the difference... or paying attention... deeply listening. Respect is that combination of compassion and dignity that helps us see a person as God sees a person.

When Jesus challenges us to love our enemies, it is not to foster more niceness in the world – it’s not a call to politeness. It’s a call to transformation – to a deeper understanding of others, of our purpose, of ourselves, and of God. The One who forgives us completely, cherishes our creatureliness, and cheers us on for making a difference in the lives of others is the One who is our perfect model for love.

A fellow pastor friend jokes: “You know, one of those people you only love because Jesus loves them.” It’s a tongue in cheek way of indicating someone is not her favorite. But even so, we are called to love those who are not our favorites – even the ones might drive us a little crazy, even the ones who we perceive as enemies. After all, God

makes the sun rise on all of us.

And sometimes, when we hold someone we love only because Jesus loves them, with respect – if we tap into our deepest compassion and love someone in action even if it's not an emotional connect, sometimes we are the ones who are transformed. We are the ones who see the Paradise side of things. We might even start to see what Jesus sees in that person – the beloved-ness, the charm, the light, maybe the brokenness, always the potential.

Paul has something to say about this in his letter to the Romans, about how it is that we can foster respect and kindness. In my Spiritual Formation Bible, this is titled: “The Marks of a True Christian” Romans 12:9-18. Paul writes:

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

In this season of political campaigns and division, living peaceably seems very challenging. After all, someone's vote can make a real difference for good or ill for the world. But if we tap into respect, if we find mutual understanding, if we stop putting our fellow citizens in boxes, we might find we have more things in common than we imagined. (slow) That neighbor whose vote negatively affects our rights is the same neighbor who hugs you in the driveway when you first learn a diagnosis. That uncle who drives you crazy at Thanksgiving is the one whose favorite cookie recipe is your grandmother's ginger snaps as well.

TV2 Denmark has a brilliant campaign going on about our connectedness called, “All that we share.” It's a whole interweb rabbit hole, but here's one video from the campaign: [youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc)

When we engage in the compassion and connection that is respect, “us and them” just becomes us – the class clowns, stepparents, dancers, the broken-hearted, lonely, madly in love human beings that we are.

In the Confirmation Version of the PC(USA) Study Catechism, a teaching tool so that we can better understand and live out our faith, there’s a question about how to treat others – it’s specifically about how to treat non-Christians and people of other religions, but I think it’s a good answer for those challenging times when we’re having a hard time understanding someone else – when the emotion of respect isn’t within our reach, but we know we are called to kindness. Here’s this gem:

“Question 39. How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions? I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith by word and by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.”

Respect is about our reflecting the Lord’s welcome and grace for others as we experience it for ourselves. These are not vague ideas about niceness. Practices like having compassion, humility, and working for justice are what can help us as we seek to love others, even our enemies. Finding common ground, like in the video, and reminding ourselves of our own and others’ humanity and potential. Stuck in a conversation with someone who feels like an enemy? Respect the other person, find some empathy, reflect on similarities and mutual values. These are basic features of healthy relationships in any setting.

And most of all pray for others, even and especially those who drive you a little crazy, who seem like an enemy. Your prayer might not “work” like you think it would – it might not make the other person less annoying or more loving. But it very well might transform you.

Cole Arthur Riley is a writer, a poet, and author of the New York Times bestseller, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. I came across her through her breath prayers during the pandemic – breath prayers that center Black experience and touched me with their emotional depth and healing release. If you

aren't familiar with Breath Prayers, the idea is that you have two short phrases for your prayer – one you pray as you breath in God's Spirit and the other as you release. Our prayer list has one of Cole's breath prayers on the back of it, if you want to try out an example – you can get one on the offering lectern on your way out the door.

In her section on Dignity, Arthur Riley tells the story of writing some of her book from bed, suffering from depression and pain. Her beloved brings her meals and without saying many words, reminds her that even if she never writes another word, she is valued and loved; her worth will never be diminished. She writes: "I don't know what dignity is. Not cognitively. But I know what it feels like. To be loved, to receive honor, to be encountered as a human, not because of any demonstration or performance of such, but because, in mystery, your very being is a miracle, your existence a delicate stitch in the cosmos."

This is why we're called to practice respect, kindness, love – to outdo one another with honor. May it be so.