

## Character and Virtue: Kindness

Colossians 3:12-17

February 26, 2023

Can institutions be virtuous? It was the question that launched a robust discussion among members of our staff leadership team a few weeks ago. Can institutions be virtuous? As a result of that discussion, it's a question I've been pondering ever since.

It is, I think, not unfair to say that we live in an age of anti-institutionalism. And, in many cases, for good reason. Once-venerated establishments built to serve the common good have too often been co-opted, exposed, worn down by decades of justified criticism. Meanwhile, an expanding emphasis on individualism has eroded our appreciation for what institutions *should* do. That is, shape and mold our personal and communal character. Many of us have a negative, visceral reaction to such shaping. *Don't tell me what to do!* But what if this is what we need?

Can institutions be virtuous? In the words of a colleague, *I sure hope so*. Because here's the truth: we will be shaped by something. The choice is not whether but what will form our character. What kinds of messages and messengers will we allow to have that influence on our lives, the lives of our children and families, the spaces and stories and communities we share?

This Lent at Second Church, we're going to engage intentionally the virtues that shape character.

Let's start here: becoming a follower of Jesus is not a singular event or an isolated decision. Disciples are formed by regular practices of spiritual discipline in community. Or, to paraphrase Aristotle's great insight: we are what we repeatedly do.

I am trying to be a runner. I say "trying" because it's the most accurate description of an ongoing and often uneven process. Last summer, as my fortieth birthday

approached, I became increasingly aware of a physical and spiritual need to reengage the discipline of running. And so, I set a goal to run a half marathon in Zionsville in November. It seemed preposterous given the shape I was in at the time. But I needed to name it. I needed to set the intention, to mark the calendar. That was six months ago this week. The half marathon goal was met. I set another one. But here is a discovery that has been most humbling for me in the process: running has not become easier in those months. I think I always imagined that a day would come when lacing up my shoes or hopping on the treadmill would be pure unmitigated joy. That has not happened, at least not for me. I am still trying. The decision is daily. It's a discipline.

Virtues chart a similar course. That is, our character is formed through determination, repetition, and accountability. Character is shaped by the communities to which we choose to belong—the ones we allow to hold us accountable and speak hard truth to us (more on that next week). Our habits form us. We are what we repeatedly do, especially what we repeatedly do together. And so, in this season of holy preparation, we take up the virtues that make life meaningful.

I want to start on the playground of an elementary school, an uncompromising training field for the brutal realities of life in community. The place where friendships and alliances take shape and then break apart in a matter of minutes. Where peer pressure and groupthink can lead to bullying and isolation. The place where physical prowess is rewarded and weakness is not tolerated. These dramatic dynamics were on my mind last fall when our family showed up with our boys for the annual back-to-school night at Clay Center Elementary School. It was one of

those impossibly gorgeous late summer evenings, and after exploring their classrooms and meeting their teachers, Sam and Ben wanted to play on the playground behind the school. Ben was on the verge of day one of kindergarten, and I was on the verge of tears at any moment. The boys ran ahead, and I tried to inconspicuously watch over them. OK, maybe I was hovering. But good thing, because a moment later, Ben called to me, "Dad!"

I took off. *Don't worry son, I'm coming to protect you from them!* No need. What Ben wanted me to see was a collection of painted rocks. The rocks were mostly decorated in bold and bright colors, but there in the center was one with a simple message that brought those tears I'd been trying to hold back. The rock was painted purple and, in carefully drawn small black letters, read: "Kind is the New Cool." I took a picture and have had it as the background on my devices ever since. Kind is the new cool. A hope. A promise. The word of the Lord written on a playground rock.

The words we read in scripture were shaped by their setting, and our understanding of them is shaped by ours. We live in a moment defined by a decency deficit disorder. We are suffering from a lack of basic kindness in our public and even private discourse—a concern for the wellbeing of others and a tenderness in our interpersonal interactions. I have shared my conviction from this pulpit before that the decline in embodied encounters has exacerbated this reality. Indeed, we need more playgrounds because communication mediated through screens has the effect of separating us from the impact of our words and our actions. Echo chambers of likemindedness drive us more deeply into self-righteous judgment and more distant from other points of view.

The letter to the Colossians was written to an early Christian community struggling to maintain a unique identity in a hostile context. The expectation set forth for disciples of Jesus is this: Be strange. Be different. Live in ways that confound and confuse those captive to a culture of contempt. In other words, be kind when it's the last thing anyone would expect.

We begin this series with kindness because the virtue is often poorly understood and cheapened by misuse. My teacher Stanley Hauerwas writes, "The great enemy of kindness...is sentimentality...Sentimentality mocks kindness by confusing grand public displays of concern with genuine, heartfelt tenderness." He is on to something. The sentimentality that often parades as kindness serves to undermine the virtue's power. Kindness is not weak. Indeed, it often displays the kind of strength that can take our breath away.

Taylor Mali is an English teacher, a writer, and a poet. His poem, "What Teachers Make" is a moving answer to the question posed by the title. What do teachers make anyway? Mali writes:

"I make parents tremble in fear when I call home at suppertime:

Hi. This is Mr. Mali. I hope I haven't called at a bad time, I just wanted to talk to you about something your son said today.

To the biggest bully in the grade, he said,

'Leave that kid alone. I still cry sometimes, don't you? It's no big deal.'

And it was the noblest act of courage I have ever seen."

Listen to this: Kindness is not fragile; it is not to be confused with vapid niceness or preening politeness. Kindness looks like courage in a world where meanness is the model. Be strange. Be different.

We begin this series with kindness because kindness is the character of God. In Jesus Christ, we are given a permanent picture of God's heart. And in Jesus, we see the power of kindness. Jesus, who became our kind in order to redeem humanity, models the way of kindness. Jesus was not cruel, but neither was he sentimental. The kindness he lived was displayed in words and acts of deliberate welcome, radical inclusion, unconditional grace, and unmerited compassion. His life provides the pattern for our life together.

I spend a lot of my time thinking about how the Church is perceived by those beyond these walls. Many have left us behind because of experiences of judgment and cruelty in a place that should

be defined by the kindness of God. Some see communities of faith as relics of an era long past. Some distrust institutions beset by hypocrisy whose loudest voices spew hatred rather than love.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to live this way in the Church. The Apostle Paul spoke of kindness as a fruit of the Spirit. Fruit grown with intention and discipline. We are what we repeatedly do. Practices of kindness will make us kind. What if our church grew kindness? What if we were a place where lives—all lives—were shaped by a genuine tenderness intentionally enacted? What if everyone knew that this was one institution where kindness was the default setting no matter the challenges faced or the differences discovered? What if together we said, "We will not be cruel. We will not give in to weak sentimentality. We will look to the cross, where the courageous kindness of God shatters the callous cruelty of human judgment. We will practice kindness and so become like the One we seek to follow.

It was the Presbyterian saint Mr. Rogers who said, "There are three ways to ultimate success. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind."

Let us be kind as the world watches in wonder.