

Sermon “Christianity and Kindness”
Kirk of St James
Sunday July 7, 2024
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

I have some scenarios I would invite us to envision this morning as we begin. The first is a group of jr. high students sitting together in a school cafeteria. While they are talking one of them notices someone sitting alone at a table. Eventually, even though they are totally wrapped up in the fun at their table one of them gets up and goes over to the person sitting alone and sits down with them. In the next one picture two neighbours that have lived side by side for the last twelve years, they do not spend much time together but occasionally if they are both out gardening or BBQing etc., they chat. Then one day one of the neighbours shows up on the doorstep of the other, they received some sad news and didn't know who else to talk to. In the next one picture a mechanic, they are the one everyone in the area goes to because they are known to be honest and trustworthy--in every single thing they do they are reliable. Then for the final one picture a person or a couple making supper, and they realize they have misjudged the serving size and have a ton of leftovers. They remember someone from the community lost their spouse a couple of months ago, so they package some up and drop it over later that evening.

If I were to ask you what these scenarios have in common, what comes to mind? We could say that the people in these scenarios were kind and caring people. We could say that they are being thoughtful and doing something nice for others. These statements would certainly be true. Well, I was asked during the membership courses that we have been running a tricky question--what is the difference between someone being nice, and someone acting out of their faith? What is the difference between being a nice person and being a Christian? That was a tough question but ultimately, I would say (and you are welcome to disagree!) that it comes down to our motivation.

The student sat down with the other lonely student because they learned in Sunday School to care for others. That the neighbour who came to their other neighbour for support knew that in the course of their conversations they had talked about the love and care of Christ and felt in turn they would show them the same care. That the mechanic believed that you do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and that you should always be honest. That the person or people with the extra leftovers and dropped them off to someone who was grieving wanted to show love and support through the extended Christian community. When we are shaped by Christ in our lives, that love then shapes everything else we do.

Now here is my next question—do you believe that these actions are forms of evangelism? As we know all too well evangelism is a word that carries a lot of baggage in our society. The word can bring forth images of overzealous preachers yelling at people to repent, it can bring forth feelings of coercion, and pressure. Evangelism is also a word that has divided people over how it should be done. Congregations and even seminaries have sharp divides over how to live the Good News. Some believe that it is done through proclamation--we are going to preach this message wherever we go and win people to Christ. Others believe that it is done through mission, that in helping people address immediate needs it practices evangelism and does not need the addition of words. A practical example of this might be a church who decides to offer a weekly lunch for the unhoused in their community. Some argue that people should hear a bible message before the meal, to make sure the word is proclaimed. The other half argue that it is more important to fill stomachs and there is no need for anything else. Both sides can make a case but, if we are to truly follow the example of Christ, we would find a third approach.

Christ treated people holistically, we are not just a spiritual being, or a physical being—we are both. Jesus offered both healing and proclamation depending on what the person needed most. Jesus was sent into the world to make known the invisible God, and in turn we are called to do the same. “Christians are to be good news before they share the good news. The words of

the gospel are to be incarnated before they are verbalized.” We embody the love of Christ, and his teaching, and then we share that with others through our words and actions.

As Christians our words and actions are important. When Priscilla Pope-Levinson talks about the challenges of sharing the Good News in our modern world one of the biggest criticisms of Christianity is hypocrisy. “Hypocrisy communicates more loudly and forcefully than pious words, even the right pious words.” Jesus warned us about things like this with sayings like “take the plank out of your own eye before commenting on the speck in your neighbours.”

It can be challenging to live our faith in our daily lives. I am going to share an embarrassing story from this past week that hit home for me. One of the boys said a word they are not allowed to say (think what beavers build). Horrified Chad asked him where he heard it, and he said, “Mommy said it.” Well, you can imagine I replied, “I most certainly did not.” He replied, “Yes you did, and this where you said it.” He was right. I muttered it while fighting my way through traffic over the Hillsborough bridge close to rush hour. I didn’t think he heard me, but he did. It was a good reminder that what we say and what we do matters.

Renowned preacher Tom Long once recounted a story about telling the difference between “doing” the word of God verses “speaking” the word of God. A number of years ago at Emory University the Honorary degree recipients each received their award and then spoke to the gathered audience. There was one moment where the collective crowd was captivated by one of the speakers. A man named Hugh Thompson Jr. who did not finish college but instead enlisted as a helicopter pilot in the military and was later deployed to Vietnam. While flying patrol over a village he realized his colleagues on the ground were massacring a village of seniors, women and children. So, he landed his helicopter between the villagers and his own troops, evacuating, protecting, and guarding every innocent person he could. For his actions he was ostracized, nearly court martialled, and hounded by the public. It took 30 years before he

was awarded one of the highest honours that could be given. When he told the students why he did what he did he spoke of his faith in simple terms, and what his parents taught him as a child, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These words of Jesus, taught in Sunday School, lived and embodied through his life impacted the listeners present that day. “Thomson’s words about his faith had weight because the man had obviously “walked the talk.” In the same way, the church will not be heard if what we do as Christians is at odds with what we say about our faith.

Thousands of years ago Jesus sent his followers out into the world two by two to share the good news of the gospel through their words and their deeds. We are commissioned to that same work today. I know that is not always easy, and often we are not even sure of how to do that. This idea of evangelism can be anxiety inducing. We feel we don’t have the words, or the right words, or we don’t want to be pushy or offend. Those are all valid and understandable feelings.

It is helpful to remember that evangelism is not really about trying to get people to believe a certain thing, or to get them on our side, or grow our church simply for the sake of numbers. It is more about what we tell others about the God who has come to mean so much to us, and to speak the truth of that in love. We do this everyday simply through our words and actions. How do we live our faith through word and deed? How do we put the teachings of Christ to work in the world? Challenging questions for sure, but ones well worth thinking about.