

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, C
Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

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Portland, Oregon
February 3, 2019

David Brooks is a political columnist for the New York Times. This week he wrote a piece called *Kindness Is a Skill – Practical tips for fighting a culture of savagery*. With a title like that, how could I not read on? He wrote,

I went into journalism to cover politics, but now I find myself in [something like] national marriage therapy [---which is not going well]. Covering American life [today] is like covering one of those traumatizing Eugene O’Neill plays about a family where everyone screams at each other all night and then when dawn breaks you get to leave the theater.

But don’t despair, I’m here to help. I’ve been searching for practical tips on how we can be less beastly to one another, especially when we’re negotiating disagreements....

He goes on to share a really helpful list of skills for working through conflict – and these skills could apply to national life or to our personal lives. Just a few:

Always presume the other person has good intentions (even if you doubt this)...

When you’re stuck in disagreement, try to identify at least one thing you can agree on, to give you “one step forward into a shared reality”...

Give up either/or thinking. There are usually many more options neither side has imagined yet...

And (this is so simple) *thank* people – for their time, for sharing a thought, for asking a question-- find a way to keep on *thanking people*.

I like what David Brooks is trying to do. I hear the word “kindness” popping up everywhere these days, and I take it as a sign that people deeply long for a kinder and more compassionate way of life – but kindness doesn’t just happen. Kindness is a skill. Kindness has to be intentionally practiced. Especially when people feel threatened or defensive, when they “feel their sense of self is disrespected and under threat.” And that’s a lot of people today. (*NY Times, Jan 28, 2019*)

David Brooks is a person of faith, and I appreciate the way he’s using his public voice to call our society to work toward a higher unity that can express our shared values as a

nation and democracy. He's challenging us to hang in there with each other – Republican and Democrat, urban and rural, north and south, across genders, across ethnicities, across all the diversity that truly makes us great.

What Brooks gets at in his column is very similar to what Saint Paul addressed in a letter to the congregation at Corinth some 2,000 years ago. But St Paul was able to take the conversation even deeper. Paul appealed to the deepest value of all – unity in Christ, unity in God. And he called the people not just to practice kindness, but to practice self-giving love.

The small congregation in Corinth started out strong, but it was a volatile group of people, and over time they fell into conflict and backbiting. Members took each other to court over small disagreements they should have been able to resolve on their own. They split into factions over which former pastor they liked best. For Holy Communion, the rich people who didn't have to work came early and guzzled all the wine, even got drunk, before the working folks and slaves even arrived – showing no respect for each other or for Christ's body and blood. People who spoke in tongues acted like they were more important than everybody else. There was sexual scandal, there was idol worship, and more.

The Christians in Corinth weren't bad people, no worse than we are, but they had lost their way. Just like we do sometimes. They weren't treating each other well. They weren't acting like the body of Christ. They seemed to have forgotten what brought them together in the first place. To look at them, you would never guess that it was Christ's self-giving love that had made them a community. Love was at the center of who they were – Christ's love that welcomed sinners, Christ's love that went to the cross. Paul called them back to this love.

Paul challenged their unhealthy spirit of competition and rivalry. Some who considered themselves "super-Christians" were turning worship into a show, featuring themselves, speaking in tongues, at center stage. It was all about getting glory for themselves, not giving glory to God. Whenever we get fixated on our own status, the first thing we lose is compassion for others. We step all over people. We raise ourselves up by putting others down. But where is the love? Love is never just about me – love is about others. Love promotes the welfare of others.

I recently heard love described as acting out "a concern for others similar to the concern God has for us and every living thing." That takes my breath away, honestly. Our attitude is meant to be similar to God's attitude. God treasures each person, each creature, each rock and tree. God lives in each of us and wants to channel God's own

love through us. We each have a share in God's Spirit, and we each are capable of acting in a loving way toward those around us.

Love like this goes way beyond tolerance. It goes beyond kindness, too. Love puts the other person's welfare in primary place. This is *agape*, the Greek word for self-giving love, the love Paul commends to the Corinthians.

Can we name this kind of love as a shared value in American culture today? I honestly don't know. I wish I could say love was America's shared value. But I do know that love is a shared value among all major religions. Christians, Jews, Muslims are called to love God and love neighbor. Buddhists and others lift up the virtue of compassion. For people around the world who honor God and seek their highest human purpose, love is a core value. And it certainly is for you and me.

God's dream for humanity is love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful or arrogant or rude. The Corinthians were all of that -- arrogant, rude, boastful, hot-tempered-- Paul had their number. And in our day? It's painfully true that rudeness, bullying and insults are not only tolerated but rewarded. The angrier the voice, the better it plays. But we must never grow accustomed to this. Christ calls us to better.

Speaking in a loving manner, a civil manner, is not weakness – it is strength. Love isn't afraid to be bold. Love "rejoices in the truth," it doesn't shrink from expressing what's real and true. But as any spouse will tell you, venting anger is not constructive or loving. It tears down, it doesn't build up. Any teacher will tell you that angry parent emails are counterproductive. They sting but they don't communicate. If there's an issue at school, parents need to choose words carefully and express concerns respectfully, with love. Anger or disrespect rarely changes a person for the better, it only hardens them, just the way shame and judgment do. Love is what changes people.

Jesus showed us how to boldly speak the truth in love, preaching to his hometown crowd in Nazareth. They were so proud of him there in the synagogue, congratulating themselves on what a leader their little Jesus had grown up to be. Jesus could have kept still and enjoyed the praise, but he had a bold word of love to speak. He reminded his neighbors that God didn't only love the hometown crowd – God also did miracles for foreigners, outsiders -- the widow in Sidon, the leper from Syria. This may not sound inflammatory to us, but their response was rage. The crowd tried to throw him off a cliff! Jesus pushed their buttons boldly, for the sake of love – love for his hometown and love for the foreigners they preferred not to care about.

Why were the people so furious? They wanted to think they were first and best and maybe even the *only* people God loved. They resented outsiders and strangers. They

couldn't stand having their privilege threatened, giving up space and power to someone they didn't think deserved it. But they were living out an old, insecure way of being human – forgetting that God's love is infinite, and God's acceptance has no boundaries or limits. God's new community embraces the stranger. God's new community operates with justice, which is all about moving beyond "just us." There's a powerful saying that every time we try to draw a circle to define who's in and who's out... God stands just on the other side of whatever line we draw. That's how outreaching God's love is.

The truth is, every attempt we make at loving each other will fall short. But here's the greater truth: God's love is patient and kind – and forgiving. God's love never ends. God's love for humankind never fails, it never runs out, it never lets us down. God's love is infinite.

Hatred won't last forever; in fact it has lost the battle already, at the cross and the grave. Rage will finally burn itself away to nothing. What will last to eternity is the essence of God, which is love.

So in this life, as we learn to love, we are practicing a way of life that will be ours forever. From now until the day we finally see God face to face, we will be practicing love. We are anchoring our lives in the one thing that endures. That's the kind of life I want to live, and I know you do too. May God lead us in this courageous, bold, compassionate way. Amen.