



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: August 9, 2009

The Kindness Defined by Church, Robert B. Culp

Micah 6:6-8; Galatians 5:16-25

One of my favorite parts of World News on ABC is the “Person of the Week” segment that is featured every Friday. Sometimes the focus has to do with an extraordinary achievement on the part of an individual, while at other times the focus shifts to a noteworthy milestone or discovery that has affected the entire human family ... with all these features somehow touching the heart and mind. Recent segments have included some very special stories, such as:

- * that of a 7-year-old little girl who has raised enough money through her art projects to build an orphanage in Haiti under the auspices of the Global Orphan Project, with plans for her to build more; and that of
- * the New England town of Hyde Park whose residents have raised \$150,000 to assist in the pressing needs of a paralyzed 21-year-old veteran who returned home from Afghanistan; and that of
- * two Vermont innkeepers who have initiated “pink slip getaways,” which are all-expense-paid week ends at their inn, for couples who have been out of work for more than 6 months and who need time simply to be with one another as a couple, to get away from the stresses and strains of unemployment ... even if only for a couple of days.

I’m not sure what it is about these heart-warming stories that gets to me. Perhaps it has to do with being touched by the profound and tender human needs that surround us, the hurts and hungers and hopes among those who are our sisters and brothers in the family of God. Or maybe it has to do with an unsettling wonderment as to how such dilemmas develop and seem to always be with us, and the helplessness we feel inside that is reflected upon the faces of those in need. Or, it may have to do with how such simple acts of human kindness seem to have such a powerfully personal impact, such that they stand out as “unusual” and worthy of receiving “network recognition.”

After one of these ABC segments a week or so ago, I remember lamenting how it seems that kindness is something of an odd relic these days. If strangers offer to assist us with a heavy package in the parking lot, we suspect their motives. Neighbors who used to help us with a leaky faucet are now found in the Yellow Pages. And if sickness intrudes and we are laid up for several weeks, the only ones who call are the pharmacies and doctors’ offices, if then.

We live in a culture where kindness seems to be in short supply. Somehow, there is a mean-spirited dimension within our culture that’s obsessed with winning and coming out on top – no matter the cost; a culture that values self-centered transactions rather than deep, abiding relationships; a culture that rewards cut-throat nastiness and intimidation, where abuse and violence are rampant, and where kindness is perceived as a sign of weakness. Simply witness some of the competitive “reality shows” on television, or the video games that are being marketed, and you can readily discover that looking out for “Number One” is the prevailing norm, with kindness being relegated to the “clunker” heap.

Certainly, it has not always been this way

I remember growing up in a neighborhood where we took care of one another, looking out for those who were in need. When Miss Lowry fell and broke her hip, some of us boys mowed her lawn, trimmed her hedges, and weeded her small garden, while 4-5 mothers coordinated a schedule of casseroles and meals that were delivered over six weeks or so, and some men saw to it that she made it to the doctor. We knew who our neighbors were and cultivated their friendship.

In Fort Lauderdale where I served as an Assistant Minister right out of Seminary, there was a man named Clayton Henderson who drove the church van and picked up seniors. He brought them not only to church every Sunday, but also to every fellowship event and study group that met at the church throughout the week. I understand that he filled up the gas tank and serviced the van regularly, all at no charge to the church nor to those he picked up. He also sent get-well cards to all those men in the church who were hospitalized, conveying personal messages of encouragement, and simply signing each note, "All our best from your friends in the Men's Group" (Well, Clayton was the Men's Group!).

And then there was a man named Paul Burke in one of the churches my father served. Almost every Saturday morning for a time, he would arrive at the door with a big box of French Cruller donuts for the four of us kids, which we took into the kitchen and devoured, while he and dad would speak quietly in the living room. It was only years later that I learned he was coming to the house to see dad because his wife was dying of cancer, and he needed dad's counsel to assist him with a number of family matters ... and he felt badly that he was intruding upon family time. But he always had a kind word and a friendly smile.

But, you know, such acts of kindness are really not confined to the "once upon a time" of "Leave It To Beaver" or "Father Knows Best." For they are taking place every single day, right here and right now, only they are not being trumpeted nor recognized on broadcast news programs. I suspect our need is to follow the admonition of an old prayer that reads: "May we know your power and presence this day, O God, if we but open our eyes and listen for your voice."

Following the lead of such a prayer, I think ...

- * of those special friends in our midst who regularly call and check on those who are homebound, seeing if their needs are being met and letting them know that they are not alone; and
- * of professionals in our fellowship who render their services and expertise in all kinds of areas to folk who are in need, and do so pro bono, expecting nothing in return and simply happy to help; and
- * of those who quietly share their time and talents delivering meals-on-wheels, or escorting people in wheelchairs in the hospital, or visiting friends in special care facilities, or transporting those who need rides to doctors' offices, or cooking and taking meals to those who have been ill, or providing funds to assist in personal needs.

And I think of those who have been a part of our Mission Project to NYC this year, demonstrating kindness in so many ways – members of our Mission Team, of course but also, all those who have supported them in preparing meals and packets for the homeless, who donated supplies and transported them, who have been holding them and those they are serving close in their thoughts and prayers.

A long time ago, the prophet Elijah fled to a cave during a trying time in his ministry. He had done battle with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, and had won a spectacular victory. But fickleness in the hearts of the people caused the public to turn their cheers into jeers, and Elijah had to flee for his life, leaving him depressed and frightened and feeling all alone. Amidst the darkness of the cave that surrounded him, a darkness that reflected what he felt inside, Elijah withdrew into himself, slamming the doors of his heart closed and locking it against others. He was distrustful and disgusted, bitter and angry.

Believing that he alone in all Israel had been faithful and had kept covenant with the Lord, he complained to God, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword. And I, even I only, am left." While Elijah moaned to God how rotten the world had turned, God knew differently, and he spoke to Elijah of the many thousands of virtuous folk he was proud to call his own. So turned in upon himself and bitter in his cynicism, Elijah became blind and deaf to the goodness and faithfulness among his own people.

You see, kindness truly does thrive in the world all around us. Somehow, though, it's our awareness of

it, our celebration of it, that seems to be on the wane.

Fred Craddock tells of a place called Watts Bar Lake, nestled in the poverty-stricken hills of Appalachia, where he once served a tiny rural mission among the poorest of the poor. It was their custom on Easter evening to have a baptismal service – by immersion, of course – at sundown. After the candidates for baptism moved into the water to be dunked, they waded across to the shore, where the congregation had gathered to sing and cook supper. The folks on the shore had built, with hanging blankets, little booths for changing clothes.

After those newly baptized individuals had dried and changed, they formed a circle around the campfire to get warm, and then the rest of the congregation formed a larger circle around them. A man named Glenn Hickey always did the honor of introducing the new people, giving their names, explaining where they lived and worked. And then, Craddock says, the ritual would begin. One by one, each person in the circle would make an offer to those standing by the fire:

“My name is Sally; and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing ...”

“My name is Frank; and if you ever need anyone to help you chop some wood ...”

“My name is Samuel; and if you need help to do any repairs around your house ...”

“My name is; and if you need me to sit with you when you’re sick, or if you ever need a ride into town, or if you simply want someone to sit down with you and talk ...”

Around the circle it went, until those who had symbolically died and risen with Christ through baptism were officially adopted. Then they all had a square dance, and at the appointed time, a man named Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, “Well, time for us all to go.”

He would linger to put out the fire, kicking sand and pouring water over the dying embers. Then he looked at the preacher and said, “Craddock, folks don’t ever get any closer than this.”

When Craddock told this story before a group many years later, there was a palpable sense of awe and wonder in the quiet of the sanctuary where he was preaching. From the pulpit, Craddock looked out at all of the worshipers, peered over his glasses, and let the story sink in. Then, finishing his sermon, he said, “Once, when I told this story to a group of city folk, they looked amused, but were confused. One of them said, ‘Fred, what do they call that where you come from?’ Craddock said he replied, ‘I don’t know what you call it where you come from. But from where I come from, we call it well, we call it church.’”

Let us pray:

O Lord our God, each day is filled with such promise and so many possibilities for us to show kindness in simple and practical ways. Thank you for “defining kindness” for us through the ministry of Jesus, and through our actions and attitudes in being your church. Touch us to become more aware of the goodness that surrounds us and to share with others the loving kindness we know in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.