

As followers of Christ, we look to the nature of God to show us how to live. The psalmist describes beautifully and simply the characteristics of God. Even though the word “kindness” isn’t used here, you can sense it. It’s interesting that out of all the fruit of the Spirit, kindness is the most noticeable because you see the evidence. God’s steadfast love, kindness, and provision are made known here in the psalmist’s words. In other words, we learn kindness by how God relates to us. There are multiple places in Scripture where the word “kindness” is used to describe God, and in the Old Testament, the word ordinarily translated as kindness is *hesed*, which means “to commit to someone or something. It means to display devotion without conditions” (Eugenia Anne Gamble, *Tending the Wild Garden*). In other words, kindness isn’t something one does expecting something in return. In the New Testament, the word we translate as “kindness” in Galatians 5:22, *chrestotes*, “arises from these bedrock beliefs in God’s unshakable kindness and mercy” (Gamble). One thing about this Greek word that is used. This word isn’t about being “nice.” “It doesn’t refer to being sweet and not hurting people’s feelings. It is more substantial than that. It means to be gracious, to find goodness easy, to display integrity, to be drawn to excellence in others” (Gamble). Said simply, it means compassionate and useful. “To live out Spirit kindness is to be of service, especially when it would be easier not to be” (Gamble). In Luke’s Gospel, which we won’t read today- please look it up on your own, Luke “crowns his argument by reminding them that a defining quality of God is kindness and that kindness is extended not just to the upright but also to ‘the ungrateful and the wicked’ (v. 35). Because God is steadfastly kind,

those who follow God are also to be steadfastly kind. Kindness is to be a characteristic of how God's people relate to loved ones, faith, family, strangers, and enemies. No one lies outside the embrace of God's kindness or our own. The early Christian church understood that the ultimate kindness of God was displayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, living a Christlike life must include genuine kindness, courage, and sacrifice" (Gamble). Like in Colossians when Paul writes to "clothe ourselves with kindness" (3:12), this is to be what people first see in us. Paul also writes to the church in Philippi encouraging them to mirror or imitate Christ, who is God the Holy Parent with skin on (that's what we mean we when say "incarnation") and moved into the neighborhood. While Paul is honing in on Christ's humility, which gives us a clue of what must have been taking place in their context, these words of preamble to the infamous "Christ Hymn" describe what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus, especially with the background story of Jesus' self-emptying and crucifixion. Paul is issuing a call for unity and harmony within the Philippian church. He uses terms taken from a political context, "where they were used to call citizens to come together for the common good" (*CEB Study Bible*). I wonder though if these words don't also speak of treating one another with kindness- not always what we call "niceness," emulated by Christ. Before turning to God's Word for us this day, let us pray together. **PRAY. READ.**

Early this summer when some colleagues and I met to discuss a fall preaching series, we had no idea what would be in store for us the weeks we preached on the fruit of the Spirit, particularly the weeks of peace,

patience, and kindness. We anticipated a heated election, but we had no idea that a tropical storm would send us into chaos and we would not only encounter these fruit in a powerful way but also observe them in action through the power of the Holy Spirit. Some of you may remember the cartoon of the cat and mouse called “Tom and Jerry?” I saw a meme with Tom, the cat, and Jerry, the mouse, on it, and it read, “Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.” And another meme reads, “Kindness is not an act; it’s a reflection of your soul.” I would add it’s a reflection of your faith, too. I witnessed and have heard story after story in these last few weeks of neighbors helping neighbors (and when I say “neighbors,” I’m also including “strangers”)- of neighbors checking on one another after Helene- of neighbors sharing their food or hot water or power- of neighbors cutting down trees off houses and cars or rescuing people or pets, of neighbors sleeping in trailers in mall parking lots to restore people’s power, of neighbors helping neighbors. To me, it’s the vision of the kingdom of God on earth. My mom, brother and his family live in Black Mountain, NC, which is in Western NC, sandwiched in between places where Helene washed away people, animals, roads, homes, buildings, parts of towns, livelihoods, etc. People who live there are not okay- they’ve seen and been through too much and yet, neighbors, even the ones who have lost a lot, keep showing up and choosing God, choosing kindness. It’s not just kindness from humans; it’s Spirit kindness. “It’s love gathering the courage to choose the less-trodden path. It’s the choice to do whatever one can to be a messenger of God’s tender mercy” (Gamble). My mom’s pastor says that “even in the midst of such disaster, the human

spirit is resilient and beautiful, and we're seeing the best of it here at the church" (Mary Katherine Robinson, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church). My question for us is what makes us wait for a natural disaster in order to tend kindness in our garden? I wonder if it's because any other time, we're too busy tending the weeds of kindness such as fear and anxiety and false narratives about a group of people. Kindness can also be easily strangled out by discomfort and self-judgment or by narrowing whom we allow ourselves to see. Or by a "self-serving motivation that results from trying to seem kind in order to somehow meet our own needs" (Gamble). Or by tearing others down instead of building them up. Or maybe kindness gets strangled out because we don't even stop to think about being kind because we tell ourselves we're too busy with our own lives to stop and offer kindness to someone else?

One author quotes, "There are many ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it" (Edith Wharton). As disciples of Christ, we're called to imitate him. Yes, we're called to adopt the way Jesus, the Light of the World, not only thinks but acts. How do we see through the eyes of Christ? Did you know that all the shadows of the world cannot even put out the light of one small candle. So instead of whipping up anger against our neighbor, why not imitate or choose the way of Jesus and choose kindness? Students are asked time and time again that when they go into the lunchroom at school to look for who is sitting by themselves and then go and sit with that person. In other words, who would Jesus speak to or show love to and go to that person. The thing about kindness is it's like

light, it amplifies when we share it, and it starts with one person and then it spreads like wildfire.

The truth is that we don't know each other's stories or the struggles people are going through unless we share it. That guy who just jumped the gas line after Helene, we don't know his story. Maybe he's rude and maybe he has a sick child who needs to be on oxygen so he's desperate to get gas for his generator borrowed from a neighbor? That person on the street who didn't smile at you but cursed you instead? Maybe they were outside during Helene- not just Helene but every night- scared, hungry, cold and tired of being tired? Nia, who volunteers in the Art Room, was sharing how she couldn't believe the rudeness of this person in line at the grocery store last week. She said, "Pastor, I just kept praying, 'Help me choose you, God. Help me to choose to be kind.'" Sometimes it's as simple and as hard as Nia's prayer- said over and over again. Science has even shown that the more one practices kindness, the less stress, fear and depression they experience and the more calm, grounded and content they feel. Do you think God knew what God was doing by creating us and giving us this fruit? How do we seek out opportunities to be kind?

Here are four specific ways kindness (and we) can show up: 1. As Silent Presence, 2. As Noticing, 3. As Lifting Up Others, and As Courage. #1- kindness as silence presence. "Sometimes the greatest kindness is sitting with someone in their pain. Sitting quietly with someone in grief is a powerful demonstration of God's incarnational presence in every

circumstance. In silent presence, the silence itself becomes kindness, when words can often distract or harm. When my dad died, even though he had a long illness, it was still hard. I remember a friend approaching me weeks after his death. Instead of talking and telling me how God was in my grief, she just sat down beside me and said absolutely nothing. Tears began to roll down my face, as I felt seen and heard and safe like Jesus was sitting right beside me. Holy silence creates space for the Spirit's garden in our souls, like good potting soil in which the everlasting kindness of the Spirit's presence within rises, blossoms, and bears fruit" (Gamble). #2- Kindness as noticing. I experience this at Triune a good bit. This is when "Spirit kindness ripens in the simple act of noticing other people and recognizing them as fully human, as our siblings on the earth. Spirit kindness can be a conduit of healing grace that is powerful enough to change a life" (Gamble). You all have heard those true stories of individuals who were thinking of ending their life and then a person's smile and kind word changed their mind. "It is a reminder that we're each noticed by God, whose eye is on the sparrow, the least of these, and even our own hurting selves. Kindness as noticing always invites us to broaden our vision" (Gamble); it is focused on others and cannot be fake. We must continue to be brave enough to tend the garden of kindness, leading people to remember that they're beloved children of God. #3- Kindness as lifting up others. When people experience kindness, their spirits are lifted and they feel confident enough to face life as they know it. "Spirit kindness has the capacity to heal our self-esteem and reframe our understanding of who [and whose] we are and what we are capable of doing" (Gamble). And #4- Kindness as courage. Kindness

doesn't have to be silent or meek; it can also be fierce. "It is not possible to be kind and do nothing in the presence of oppression, violence, and brutality. What passes for kindness in those circumstances is like trying to put a Band-Aid on an amputated limb. Inaction is both unkind and inexcusable. No, "the love that is the deep root of kindness is not self-serving, and cowardice always is. Kindness always moves out on behalf of those who are in pain, especially the helpless who crumble under the boot of the powerful" (Gamble). This is why we have a justice ministry at Triune and are involved in GOAL (Greenville Organized for Accountable Leadership). If you haven't participated in a Listening Group yet, I invite you to come today at 1:00 with me and Pastor Trevor. Come and practice kindness as courage as we, in the words of the prophet Micah, seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. How can we be a part of these four ways kindness shows up? By tending kindness in our garden with the help of the Holy Spirit because how we treat one another matters to God. "We were created by kindness. We are redeemed by kindness. We live by kindness" (Gamble). We must ask God for opportunities to practice not just random acts of kindness but kindness especially when we don't feel like it. May it be so for the sake of the world! Amen.