

Jan. 19, 2020

Philippians 4: 1-20

Prayer: Dear Lord, As our brother Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Help us to love each other as Paul loved the Christians in Philippi. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Six Seconds

There’s a difference between social services and social justice. It’s the difference in being the Good Samaritan who helps someone beside the road, and being one who makes the road safe for travelers.

Those involved in social justice are in it for the long haul. Issues of physical and mental health care, transportation, equitable criminal justice, fair immigration policies, predatory lending, affordable housing -- those are complex and thorny issues.

Martin Luther King Jr. spent his life fighting for social justice. If you’ve seen the movie “Just Mercy” about Bryan Stevenson’s legal

work in Alabama, you know he tackled both services and justice by defending wrongly convicted Death Row inmates – one client at a time.

Jesus's command to love our neighbor demands that we care about those things, that we work toward fair and just systems as a lot of people in this congregation do. Nothing makes me prouder than when I'm in a citywide meeting about an issue, and I can say of the leadership, *Oh, she worships at Triune. Oh, he's been a member forever.*

I never said I wasn't petty.

But there's another way to love our neighbor, too. And that is with personal acts of kindness and respect.

A mother and writer named Rachel Stafford blogs in the *Huffington Post*. One summer she moved her family to another state.

For months after the move, her 7-year-old daughter would say, "I still don't feel like this is home. It feels like we're on a trip, and we need to get back."

Sometimes, little Avery said it while crying. Sometimes matter-of-factly. Sometimes, while laughing.

But her mother took it seriously because Avery was her redheaded child. Those of you with redheads in the family know what I mean. The white skin that can't take the sun, the freckles, the wild, untamed hair.

When we had our redhead, Madison, I worried at first because I remembered the redheads from my childhood. They were called "Freckles" or "Carrot Top." Or worse.

When Madison was in kindergarten, another mother called me one day. Her son had come home and told her he wanted to marry the girl with the orange hair.

It made Madison so mad. She said, “You call him and tell him I have red hair!”

I didn’t worry too much after that.

But Rachel Stafford worried about her daughter fitting in at her new school, worried that what was so special about little redheaded Avery back home might be perceived as odd in this new place.

She worried that Avery was too different – as we parents often do.

The first day in the new school, Rachel took both her daughters to meet their teachers. And as they were walking among 900 elementary-sized strangers and their parents, they saw a tall, slender woman rushing toward them. She made a beeline for them, not noticing anyone else in her path except Rachel and Avery.

The woman came to a stop right in front of them. She smiled and gently cupped Avery’s face in her hands, and said, "You are so cute. You are so, so cute. I just can't stand it! Who are you?"

Avery began giggling and told the woman her name.

And the woman said, “Well, you are beautiful, Avery. I just love your freckles. I am so glad you are here. I’m the P.E. teacher.”

Rachel said she had no idea how the PE teacher knew that Avery was new and anxious. But she took Avery and her older sister and introduced them to the principal and assistant principal. She made them feel special and welcomed.

Avery went home that afternoon and re-enacted the whole scene for her grandparents. When her dad came home, she acted it out again. She even called a friend back home, never leaving out the most important part – how the PE teacher had gently cupped her face in her hands.

That’s it. As Rachel put it, six seconds of interaction. Six seconds of loving a neighbor in a way the PE teacher had probably forgotten by the end of the day.

But to Rachel, it was six seconds that changed her daughter’s life, six seconds that eased her homesickness and set her on a new path.

She asks, *Don't we all want our face to be held in someone's hands?*

Don't we all want to be told how beautiful we are?

Don't we all want to know we matter, that we are not invisible?

Rachel Stafford encourages us to take the six-second challenge. In six seconds, she says, we can smile and hold open a door. We can tuck a note in a lunchbox. We can say we're sorry.

We can cup someone's face in our hands.

Shortly after I read that blog, I was at an Aldi's grocery store. I'd already checked out and was packing my groceries, which you do there. And I heard the scanner dinging and dinging and dinging. After each ding, the clerk was saying, "Good job! Good job!"

I turned around to look, and the clerk was letting a mentally disabled young man put his mother's items through the scanner. He was grinning ear to ear.

"Good job!" she said after each item.

It took about six seconds longer than if she'd done it herself.

You know, we can love our neighbor in big, important, impactful ways. And we can love her in small, important, impactful ways.

That's what I hear in today's Scripture passage from Paul. Some of Paul's very best friends were in the church at Philippi. As he closes his letter to them, he sends greetings and encouragement to individuals AND he sends profound pastoral advice. It is a beautiful combination of the personal and the universal, not unlike the way we try to combine social services and social justice.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Philippians 4: 1-20**.

4¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled

beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account.

¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

This ending to Paul's letter to the Philippians is deeply personal. We don't know what the argument was between Euodia and Syntyche. All we know is these women ministered alongside Paul when he was in Philippi.

Note that he indicated the women were devoted Christians whose names were "in the book of life." And still, they disagreed.

That is what humans do. I contend that we can disagree **AND "be of the same mind in the Lord,"** as Paul urged these women.

This is the same letter in which we find the Christ hymn in chapter 2. It tells how Jesus was in the form of God, but emptied

himself and became human, even to the point of the death. Worse yet, to the point of death on a despicable, humiliating cross.

Now he urges them, *Be of the same mind in the Lord. The Lord who emptied himself for you.*

Paul went on to thank the Philippians -- for they alone, among the churches, supported him early on. And they had recently sent more gifts for him through a man named Epaphroditus.

Paul indicated he didn't really mind deprivation, going hungry, being in need. But he thanked his friends for providing for him nonetheless.

Small kindnesses. Enormous impact.

I want to tell of some small kindnesses that have happened to me at Triune.

Last Christmas Anna Romano gave me a handmade spiral notebook of inspirational quotes. There were some hymn lyrics, some

jokes, some thoughtful reflections. And then there was a long section of quotes that looked like those sayings you find in Bartlett's.

But these looked strangely familiar. And I realized she was quoting from my sermons.

It was like having my own personal Bartlett's -- and I was petty enough to enjoy it.

A man who comes in occasionally to our Wednesday food pantry brought me a beaded purse from Cherokee, NC. Maybe a year later, he brought me a necklace on a leather thong. And I told him, *I really appreciate these but I don't want you spending your money on me.*

And he said, "I used to buy things for my mother, but she's no longer alive. It gives me pleasure to give things to you."

Owen Robertson's cartoons of our worship services line my home office and the reception area of the dining hall. He shares his talent so extravagantly.

And then there are the simple notes we find in the offering plate. One is still on my bulletin board from 13 years ago. **“I have no money but you have all my thanks for what you’ve done for me.”**

Small kindnesses. Enormous impacts.

What might you do in six seconds?

Smile and look someone in the eye?

Invite someone to sit beside you?

Pour someone a cup of coffee?

Whether an action takes six seconds or six minutes or six hours, every one of us has the power to make someone’s life a little brighter, a little better, a little warmer.

Avery’s mom reported that her red-headed second grader still had her up and down days in her new school. Her sister made a calendar for her bedroom in which she highlighted PE days. Avery perked up on those days.

"I get to see the nice lady with the big smile today," she would tell her mom. "You know, the lady who held my face."

As if her mom could forget.

Amen.