**Fruits of the Spirit Series: Kindness**

**Based on the Gospel of Matthew 18:15-17**

15 ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

**And Galatians 5:22-23**

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

In a search on Amazon for products that share the message, “Be kind,” there are hundreds of products imprinted with those word, from t-shirts, books and face masks to journal covers, nametag holders and baseball caps. But in conversations with people throughout the Nebraska Synod, it seems like they’re noticing that kindness is not necessarily in great supply these days. Kindness is key in fostering a Spirit-led community.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus teaches about being community even when the behaviors of its members cause separation to happen between or among the people of that community. What did you notice that Jesus is asking the church to do if there’s a division between people?

Jesus asks that the one who offended be visited with directly. Based on your personal experience, what can happen when two or a small group of people have a direct conversation, about a difficult subject? The truth is, that conversation can go any number of ways, can’t it? Anger can take over, as can fear and even grief. But if kindness, the fruit of the Spirit upon which we’re focusing today, can be prayerfully inserted into the fabric of the meeting, what difference do you imagine could kindness make?

What is kindness? Let’s see what bubbles up in you to answer that question. Please think of a person from your childhood who was kind.

[Pause briefly.]

Perhaps it was a teacher, a pastor or a friend. Maybe it was a sibling, a cousin or a parent. When you envision that person, what characteristics do you notice about them that showed they were kind? Especially in a challenging situation, what distinguished them as KIND as opposed to simply being NICE?

[Pause briefly.]

The kind person who comes to mind for me as a child was a girl a few years older than me named Lori. I grew up in a town small enough that, even if every child who lived within a mile of town showed up to play a game of baseball, there still wouldn’t be enough people for two complete teams. I wasn’t athletic and had a really old baseball glove. I was the kind of person who just knew that I was heading out to right field before anyone told me to go there, simply because that’s where the fewest balls were hit.

The person who always invited me to play in the town baseball games was Lori. She’d be the one to greet me when I showed up on my bike at the schoolyard. Lori would have a warm smile and a friendly question or two about how my day was going. The other people playing the game were *nice* to me…they didn’t outright tease me about my lack of skills…but Lori was *kind*. I felt like my being there mattered to Lori, even when I seemed to make very little practical difference to the game at hand.

Let’s face it. Sometimes kindness doesn’t come as easily as it seemed to come for Lori. Kindness may need to be practiced for it to feel like a more natural element in one’s life.

I’d like to conclude this reflection on kindness as a fruit of the Spirit by inviting you to take part in a spiritual practice. In this practice called the Lovingkindness Blessing, I’ll ask you to call to mind a variety of people toward whom you may feel affection or for whom you don’t have many good feelings at all. With each person, we’ll practice extending lovingkindness and trusting that the Spirit may work in and through us. This practice has been adapted from a blog called [Literature & Liturgy](https://jesusscribbles.wordpress.com/2012/10/03/a-christian-loving-kindness-meditation/).

Begin by settling into a comfortable position, with your feet on the floor in a way that feels natural for you.  Make sure you’re sitting upright, but not straining, with your spine nice and tall so you can really breathe deeply. Take a moment to relax your shoulders and let the tension out of your forehead. Let’s start by taking three long, slow breaths in and out. Center your awareness on your breathing and let yourself enjoy a moment of relaxation.

[Pause briefly.]

Let’s begin by offering ourselves a blessing. Create an image of yourself in your mind – you as you are now, or maybe you as a small child – and offer lovingkindness toward yourself. Extend grace and love to yourself. Now, imagine yourself held in God’s loving, tender hands. Just let yourself rest in God’s hands for a moment.

[Pause briefly.]

We pray:
May I experience God’s love.
May I experience God’s rest.
May I experience God’s peace.

[Pause briefly.]

Let’s now extend this blessing to someone you love. Imagine a family member or a friend, someone who brings up in you deep feelings of love, tenderness, and care. Imagine this person in your mind’s eye. Open your heart to this person and extend love and grace toward them. Now, imagine this person held in God’s loving, tender hands. Just let that person rest in God’s hands for a moment.

[Pause briefly.]

We pray:
May they experience God’s love.
May they experience God’s rest.
May they experience God’s peace.

[Pause briefly.]

Now comes what might be a more challenging part. Let’s extend a blessing to someone with whom you simply don’t get along. Interacting with this person may bring with it tension, anger or frustration. Imagine this person in your mind’s eye, and try to hold them gently in your heart, with feelings of benevolence and gentleness. If feelings of anger or tension arise, try to release these feelings to God’s care. Now, imagine this person held in God’s loving, tender hands. Just let this person rest in God’s hands for a moment.

[Pause briefly.]

We pray:
May they experience God’s love.
May they experience God’s rest.
May they experience God’s peace.

[Pause briefly.]

Finally, let’s extend God’s blessing to all beings, everywhere. All that is, all that has ever been made, all that is to come. It is all held by God, sustained by God’s love, and blessed by God’s Spirit. Imagine a beautiful, blue-green earth in your mind, full of plants and animals and so many people, so many beings – and this world is in God’s hands. The whole world rests in God.

[Pause briefly.]

We pray:

May all beings everywhere experience God’s love.
May all beings everywhere experience God’s rest.
May all beings everywhere experience God’s peace.

[Pause briefly.]

Amen.