Book 11

Sunday August 8, 1982

"BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER" 4:1-3, 31-32

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . Let all bittnerness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away for you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

In the letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament, the first three chapters are given to a kind of exposition of God's actions toward persons and the whole creation; God's purposes for people and God's goodness toward us. But then as chapter four begins, the writer says, "Now therefore!" and then goes on to spell out some of the implications for us as Christians because of our knowledge of what God has done and is doing.

One of the things which the writer mentions is "kindness." "Be kind to one another!" What could be more simple? Yet it is the little and the undramatic acts of kindness of one person toward another that needs so much to be cultivated and practiced.

Most of us do pretty well with many of the major virtues--that is, we are normally and basically honest, we do not commit murder, we hold down a regular job, we feed and clothe our families, we take care of our property, we pay our bills. And furthermore when a major crisis hits someone we know, we do our best to help out. We come through in the big acts of kindness and this is to our credit.

A few years ago, for example, I remember reading about an infant who was critically ill in Mississippi. The doctors said that a new drug, Celebin, recently developed in Great Britain was the only thing that had a chance to save the baby.

With the aid of the U.S. Air Force, and Navy Jets, plus a helicopter, the new drug was delivered in less than 30 hours. The Pilot's picture was in the newspaper; also the doctor's and the baby's. Everyone rejoiced in this miracle of modern transportation and at this dramatic act of human

kindness. I rejoiced too, but I was also a little sa d. This is the kind of dramatic energy that moves us to compassionate and super-human effort. A stricken baby, a life or death situation. Medicine an ocean away. Everyone rise and cheer--will the pilot make it? In the large and dramatic, we come through with flying colors. And this is to our credit.

But I was sa d when I thought of the undramatic in human life. Are we continually thoughtful and kind to the parents who have a sick child for ten years? What about the chronically lonely persons? Or what about the persons we meet every day who are thirsting for a kind word of encouragement or a sincere thank you or simply wanting to be treated with dignity and respect? What of the little and unnoticed acts of kindness of one person to another, day in and day out; no fanfare, no life or death situation, no dramatic cure, no publicity, but day after day, year after year, a cheerful smile, a helping hand, a quiet working.

In the case of the spectacular and the dramatic, people rise to help and this is good, but also this morning, our faith is pleading for us to remember the little undramatic acts of kindness in our every-day routine living. We need to be reminded of this because we human beings are such contradictory people. A man will give up hours of sleep to join in the search of a lost child, but then be unkind to his own children day after day.

The New Testament says simply -- "Be kind to one another." Let kindness be a part of your nature day in and day out in the little events of life as well as the big.

It's difficult to do. Let's say that you are going to meet your children or someone else after church this morning and after standing ten minutes, will you go to your car and say rather crossly--"What took you so long? We want to get home!" Or maybe you promised someone that you would be ready at a certain time, then being kind and considerate certainly means trying to be ready.

Or as you back the car out of the parking lot and then have to wait for someone else to get by and you think or say--"What's the matter with that person, doesn't he realize that I'm in a hurry?" And then you get so upset that your car stalls and your kind feelings are now all gone.

Or then again, maybe the cross and unkind words will not come until after you've returned home and the children carelessly throw their things down where they are not supposed to be, or turn on the television full blast and you shout--"Turn that thing down!" And then at the dinner table, milk is spilled on the clean tablecloth or coffee or both.

How difficult it is to be continually kind to one another in the little routines of everyday living. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted." Surely, in spite of its difficulty, that's part of our Christian faith and living.

But why do we find it so difficult to be kind in the little things of life?

1. In the first place, part of the reason may be that we live more and more in a complex society with an increasing emphasis on bigness and mass. Thus we forget how important little things can be. With so many big and seemingly dramatic things going on around us all the time, we tend to by-pass the undramatic, ongoing routine things which are also significant.

I remember talking to a physician who told me how as a little boy he dreamed of being a great surgeon who performed all those dramatic life and death operations; but now as a doctor he had to discover and remember that there are many seemingly routine, small cases he also has to deal with and being kind and interested in these is as important as those more dramatic cases.

Also because we live more and more in a technological culture in which efficiency and a smooth running uninterupted operation becomes all important, it's easy to forget the little kindnesses and courtesies in our dealings with human beings.

2. Secondly, part of the reason we find it difficult to be kind in the little things of life is that being kind means giving of ourselves--it means being out-going and accepting the risk of treating another person as a human being. Maybe some of us have tried to be kind to another person and have been rebuffed or misunderstood, or not treated kindly in return, and so we've been hurt and afraid to try it again.

However, Christian kindness is not something which is dependent on how the other person treats us or thinks of us.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you!" We're kind and forgiving because God treats us that way.

This means throwing our caution to the winds and taking risks. In his book, THE CREATIVE YEARS, Reuel Howe tells about a meek, timid teacher who was put in charge of a class of difficult children. One boy in particular, a 14 year old delighted in throwing the class into an uproar. One afternoon, the teacher in desperation kept him after school and asked him why he was making her life so miserable.

For a moment he look sullenly at her and the replied--"Because you're such a sucker for it." "I know I am," she sighed, "I've always been afraid of people like you and yet I'd like to be able to help you. Don't you want anyone to love you or help you?"

To her amazement, the bully broke down and poured out to her his story of misery, poverty and loneliness. Her honesty, her willingness to take a risk, her open kindness as a person, did more for this boy than anything else. Human kindness means giving ourselves, admitting our fears, accepting ourselves and others as they are.

3. Thirdly, sometimes we find it difficult to be kind in many of the little routines of life because on some days we just don't feel like being kind to anyone. Maybe we're tired or maybe someone has been unkind to us, or perhaps we think we're just too busy to bother with the little acts of kindness.

In these moments, and they come to all of us, we find we really have to work at being kind and we should work at it. After all, true kindness toward others does not come from our feelings or emotions of the moment anyway. Certainly those feelings and emotions effect us at the moment, but true kindness comes from the center of ourselves--it comes from the fact that deep down we see all people as human beings, each having his or her own dignity and personal worth. Thus as Christians we treat other persons with kindness because of what they are and what we are and not because of our feelings of the moment. Furthermore God's actions toward us are not based on emotional feelings of the moment.

Some time ago, a Chicago newspaper assigned one of its women reporter to search for a truly kind person. To do so,

she chose one of the largest public parking lots in the city, and then acted as if she could not find her car; or could not remember where she had parked it. She asked a number of persons who came to the lot if they had seen her car or could be of any help.

One man in particular listened carefully to her story and offered to help. First he walked around part of the large lot and then he offered to drive her throughout the lot in his car in an attempt to locate her car. All in all, he spent about 45 minutes of his time trying to help the woman. The reporter found what she was looking for -- a kind person. More than that she discovered that his daughter was having a birthday party that very moment and he had promised to try to be home early to help her celebrate.

Nothing dramatic, no life or death situation, just simple human kindness. It was a part of his everyday nature. I suppose that he didn't necessarily emotionally feel like being kind at that particular time and he was in a hurry, but he was true to his inner nature and will, no matter what the circumstances.

Being Christian means being kind--showing love in very simple, practical and specific ways. The writer Leo Tolstoy wrote a story about a shoemaker named Martin who expected Jesus to come one day. That winter day an old soldier came with no coat; Martin gave him a coat; a woman came with a hungry child and he gave them food and he also restored peace between a boy and a street vendor from whom the boy had stolen an apple. That night Martin wondered why Christ had not come. Later the shoemaker realized the words in the Bible--"In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me." Christ had come to the shoemaker but in unexpected ways. Where kindness is there also is the Christ.

Jesus was himself a kind person. He took time with playful children and would not let his disciples send them away. He was kind to the woman caught in adultery and defied a lynch mob. He was kind to people like Zaccheus and Matthew.

Add to that his feeding of the hungry, his bringing wholeness to broken lives by physical healing and spiritual refreshment and we begin to get some measure of the kindness shown by him to all kinds and conditions of people.

Kindness is one of the strongest qualities any life can have.

If we could only know the burdens of others, the tragedies met, then we would know how important kindness is. The unkind words and deeds wound quickly and deeply -- gossip spread can diminish a person's life and in a real sense destroy something of life. On the other hand, a kind word spoken, a kind act, renews life.

Life becomes so bitter, so narrow, so small, when there is no kindness. We revert to a kind of animal fear and anxious defnsiveness when kindness is neither given or recived.

What good are the trophies of unkindness, grudges that are held as if they had some lasting value, life wrecked by a lack of tolerance, hatred that wins its battles. Sure, such victories at the expense of others may make us feel strong and a little superior, but they do not make us feel very human.

We are in the world as Christians to make people more gentle and the world more kind. We may not know at times what the astounding results of kindness are and at other times we are surprised at what simple kindness can do.

The story is told of a first grade teacher who had her class members each draw a picture of something for which they were thankful. She knew that most of the class would probably draw pictures of tables loaded with food and other tangible items like bicycles and dolls.

What surprised her was the picture Douglas had drawn. Douglas she looked upon as her true child of misery, so scrubby and forlorn and so like to be found close in her shadow as they went outside for recess. Douglas's drawing was simply a hand.

But whose hand? The class was captivated by the abstract image. "I think it must be the hand of God that brings us food," said one child. "A farmer," said another. "It looks more like a policeman and they protect us," said another child. "I think," said Lavinia, who was always so serious and final, "that it is supposed to be all the hands that help us, but Douglas could only draw one of them."

The teacher had almost forgotten Douglas in her pleasure at finding the class so responsive. When she had the others at work, she bent over the desk and asked Douglas whose hand it was. Douglas mumbled, "It's yours teacher!" And then she remembered that she had often taken Douglas by the hand in his loneliness--she often did that with children, but that it should have meant so much to Douglas. . . she had never realized before how this little act of kindness had gone so far and meant so much.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted." Perhaps that's what this world today needs more than almost anything else--kindness, Christian kindness! Try it! Amen.