Sunday, August 10, 1986
ON BEING KIND
Ephesians 4:l-3,31-32; Galatians 5:22-23

A bum died. That's what it seemed like. They found his body in a flop-house on West Madison Street, Chicago's Skid Row. White male, approximately 55 years old, a bum died. They didn't know he was no bum.

The man's name was Arthur Joseph Kelly. Growing up, he wanted to be a fireman. When he was a child, he would go to the firehouse at Aberdeen and Washington, the home of Engine 34. His two sisters would go with him sometimes. The firemen were nice to the kids. This was back in the days when the neighborhood was all right.

Arthur Joseph Kelly became a teenager, and then a man, and he never had quite what it takes to be a fireman. He didn't make it. He did make it into the Army; he was a private in World War II, serving in the European Theater of Operations. He didn't make out too well; he suffered from shell shock. It messed him up pretty badly.

He was placed in a series of military hospitals, and then, when the war was over, in veteran's hospitals. Whatever had happened to him in the service wasn't getting any better. He would be released from a hospital, and he would go back to the old neighborhood in Chicago, and suddenly the "L" train would come rumbling overhead and Arthur Joseph Kelly would dive to the ground. Some people laughed at him. He didn't want to do it. A loud noise and he would drop.

He walked away from a veteran's hospital in 1954. He decided that he had to live in the real world. But he was in no condition to do that. He tried for a while, and then he went back to the only place that he remembered as being a place of happiness.

He went back to the fire station at Aberdeen and Washington. Some of the men of Engine 34 remembered Arthur Joseph Kelly from when he was a boy. They remembered him as a bright-eyed child wanting to be a fireman. And now they saw him as a shell-shocked war veteran. They took him in, they fed and clothed him, and gave him a place to sleep and let him be one of them. He wasn't a fireman, of course, but he lived in the firehouse, and he had the firemen as his friends. The military people didn't know what to do with his veteran's benefits, so some of the firemen went to the Exchange National Bank and arranged for the benefit money to be paid to a special account. The firemen of Engine 34 took it upon themselves to become Arthur Joseph Kelly's conservator and guardian.

The years went by, some of the firemen were transferred, and some retired, and some died. But there was at least one fireman at the station who would take responsibility for Arthur Joseph Kelly. The firemen didn't ask for anything in return, but Kelly would stoke the furnace and clean up and help out as much as he could. There were maybe a dozen firemen over the years who became his special guardians — the ones who would deal with the banks and the military, and who would make sure that no harm came to Kelly. For a long time, it was the Sullivan brothers; when they left Engine 34, another fireman willingly took over and then another.

Once Arthur Joseph Kelly went to a Cubs game. A car backfired, and he hit the ground. There was some snickering, but an older man who had been in the service himself and was familiar

with shell shock helped Kelly up and said, “That’s all right, fellow, you’ll be all right.” After that, Kelly stayed close to the firehouse.

His mind and his nerves were not good. The firemen had to remind him to bathe, to change clothes, and to eat properly. They did it, for twenty years and more, without anyone asking. “He’s an easygoing fellow,” one of them said. “He doesn’t harm anybody. It’s not hard for us to take care of him.”

Then the firehouse closed down. The firemen were transferred to another station house at Laflin and Madison. Arthur Joseph Kelly went with them, but it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t the firehouse he had loved as a child. He didn’t want to live there.

So the last fireman to take care of him — George Grant, a fifty-one-year-old father of eight — found Arthur Joseph Kelly a place to live. It wasn’t much — it was a room on Madison Street — but every month Grant would take care of the financial arrangements with the bank and would go to Madison Street to give money to a lady who ran a tavern near Kelly’s room. The understanding was that she would give Kelly his meals at the tavern. No liquor. The firemen didn’t want Kelly to end up as a Madison Street wino.

“The firemen had started to take care of Art way before I even got on the force,” Grant said. “I just happened to be the last in a long line of men who took care of him. I didn’t mind.”

When Arthur Joseph Kelly was found dead in his room, they thought he was a bum.

They should have been at the funeral. Arthur Joseph Kelly was buried with dignity. He was carried to his grave by uniformed firemen. They were his pallbearers. Most of them were not even born when, as a boy, Kelly had started hanging around the firehouse, but they were there at the end. The firemen never let Kelly live like a bum. They didn’t let him die like one either. (This story is told by Bob Greene in his book, “American Beat.")

Kindness, simple human kindness. No fanfares, no dramatic rescue. Just a group of people being kind to a human being who had no one else; day after day, year after year.

Dr. Lewis Thomas, in his book of essays, “The Lives of a Cell,” tells about a nomadic tribe in the mountain valleys of northern Uganda, who behave in the exact opposite way of the firemen. The lks were studied intensively by an anthropologist who detested them and wrote a book about them.

According to the study, the lks are clustered in small, dense villages, but they are really solitary, unrelated individuals with no evident use for each other. They talk, but only to make ill-tempered demands and cold refusals. They share nothing. They never sing. They turn the children out to forage as soon as they can walk, and desert the elders to starve whenever they can, and the foraging children snatch food from the mouths of the helpless elders. It is a mean society.

They breed without love or even casual regard. They defecate on each other’s doorsteps. They watch their neighbors for signs of misfortune, and only then do they laugh.

The anthropologist who studied the lks believes that this is what all of us are like in our inner selves and that we will all turn into lks when the structure of our society becomes unhinged.

This argument rests, of course, on certain assumptions about the core of human beings, and is necessarily speculative. You have to agree in advance that we human beings are fundamentally a bad lot, out for ourselves only, and displaying such graces as affection and kindness only as learned habits.

But I do not believe this is the case. Our Christian faith tells us that we are created in God's image — and furthermore, that we are connected to each other and to God. When we pay attention to the God-image in us and in others, then we are kind and caring.

However, our Christian faith also reminds us that we can become like the Iks. We too can be at times mean to each other, brutal. We only have to read the daily news stories to be reminded.

But then there are those other wonderful stories like the firemen who took care of Arthur Joseph Kelly for years.

Thus it is that one main function of our Christian faith is to remind us of the God-image within us — to call forth the best in us rather than the worst. All of us would agree that we would rather live in a society where kindness and caring are practiced rather than in a society like the Iks where meanness is the order of the day.

That's why the Bible reminds us in many different ways — 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. Be kind not only to those of your own tribe, or family, or race, or nation, but be kind to the stranger within your gates.

Especially as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be kind to every living creature. Our scripture reading from the letter to the Ephesians said, "I 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... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Kindness is one of the strongest and most beautiful qualities any life can have. In fact, the Apostle Paul tells us that one test as to whether or not an individual is letting God's spirit work in him or her is the test of kindness. He wrote, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

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 defensiveness when kindness is neither given nor received.

As Christians, we are to be especially kind to the forgotten people of the world, like Arthur Joseph Kelly. In fact, in one of Jesus' most memorable parables, he makes this point.

In the parable, it is judgment day, and God says to some people, "Come inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food; I

was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me."

And those who are invited in to be with God ask in surprise, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?"

And God replies, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

According to Jesus, God does not ask, "What church did you belong to?" Or, "What is your nationality? Are you saved? Have you been baptized? Did you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?" In the parable, God only asks, "Did you practice kindness toward those who were in need of kindness and caring? Were you kind to the forgotten people in your community?"

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted." That's what this world today needs more than anything else — kindness, and it's something that each one of us can do wherever we are.

And when we are kind, then we are truly doing God's work and God's will. Amen.