Sunday, January 23, 1994
LIFE IS DIFFICULT
Ephesians 4:1-6,31-32

"Life is difficult." It is no accident that this is the opening sentence of one of the best-selling non-fiction books in the last 16 years. The title of the book is The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck. I'm sure that many of you have read it. It was first published in 1978 and was on the hardcover bestseller list for hundreds of weeks. It has been on the trade paperback bestseller list now for more than 500 weeks and remains there.

Here's how the book begins: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once we truly understand and accept it, then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

But as M. Scott Peck points out, "Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race, or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share."

"Life is difficult," is similar to another statement we frequently make and hear: "Life is unfair." One of the best responses to that statement is to admit that life is unfair and then go on with your living. As someone said to me years ago, "Where have you ever heard it promised to you that life is going to be fair?"

There's a danger in admitting that life is difficult and unfair. We can use it as an excuse. However, the fact that we admit that life is difficult or that life is unfair does not give us an excuse for not working for as much fairness and justice in life as possible. It does not give us an excuse for maintaining the status quo.

Life is difficult. Life is unfair. Life is a series of problems. The question we all have to answer is: do we want to complain about life's difficulties and problems and do nothing, or do we want to work at solving them?

To put it another way, facing problems and working at solving them is a part of life. In fact, it is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning.

Furthermore, to acknowledge the fact that everyone has problems and that it is a normal condition is a Biblical perspective. There is nothing in the Bible to support the assumption that having problems is an abnormal condition.

If the Bible is anything, it is realistic about the kind of creatures we human beings are. Even its greatest heroes and heroines are not depicted as free of problems, but rather as those who work at solving problems, those who work at making the world better.

Every day, Jesus met people with problems. He did not belittle their problems or difficulties but rather gave people the courage and will to work at solving not only their problems but the problems of others as well.

So this is a sermon about the kind of attitude that we who profess to follow the way of Jesus are to have toward life's difficulties and problems. As you will see, more than anything else, it's a sermon on simple human kindness because being kind is one step each one of us can take that helps to alleviate life's difficulties. The Bible says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

I remember a wise pastor saying to me years ago, as I was beginning my ministry, "Learn to be kind and patient with the people you serve. Never forget that everyone you meet is struggling under some kind of load. It may not appear on the surface. They may look so utterly successful and totally competent, but don't believe it. Everyone is struggling under some kind of load. Therefore, try to lift some of the load rather than adding to their burden."

Be Kind. Everyone You Meet is Carrying a Heavy Burden.

So the first step in handling our problems and in helping others with their life's difficulties is to accept the fact that having problems is a normal condition. You are not the exception in trying to deal with the problems in your life, nor is anyone else.

And the second step is to have the attitude that you are going to do your small part in helping to solve some of life's difficulties, and one way to do this is to work daily at practicing kindness. And that's what I'm going to talk about in the rest of this sermon.

Most of us do pretty well with many of the important issues in life. We try to be honest, we do not commit murder, we hold down a regular job, we feed and clothe our families, we take care of our property, and we pay our bills. And when a major crisis hits someone we know and even those we don't know, we try to help out. We come through in the big acts of kindness, and this is to our credit.

The recent earthquake in Los Angeles is a good example. The people there are working together to help each other, and all of us throughout the country want to do what we can. Natural disasters bring out the best in many people.

The same is true of well-publicized individual emergencies. I remember reading a few years back about an infant who was critically ill in Mississippi. The doctors said that a new drug recently developed in England 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 sad. This is the kind of dramatic problem that moves us to compassionate and superhuman effort. A stricken baby, a life-or-death situation, medicine an ocean away. Everyone rises and cheers. Will the pilot get the medicine to the baby on time? In the well-publicized and dramatic, we come through with flying colors. And this is to our credit.

But I was a little sad when I thought of the undramatic in much of our human life together. Are we continually kind and thoughtful to the parents who have a sick child for ten years? What about the chronically lonely persons? And what about the people we meet every day who are thirsting for a kind word of encouragement, a thank you for a job well done, or simply wanting to be treated with dignity and respect?

What of the need for 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, month after month, 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 in addition, our faith is pleading for us to remember the little undramatic acts of kindness in our everyday routine living. We need to be reminded of this because we human beings are such contradictory people. An individual will give up hours of sleep to join in the search for a lost child but, at the same time, be most unkind to his own children day after day.

The New Testament says simply, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Let kindness be a part of your nature, day in and day out, in the little events of life as well as in the big.

What are some of the barriers to kindness in our day? Why is it so difficult?

Part of the reason is that we live more and more in a complex society with an increasing emphasis on bigness and mass. So we have a tendency to forget how important little things can be. With so many big and seemingly dramatic things going on all around us all the time, we tend to bypass the undramatic, ongoing routine things, which are also significant.

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

Another 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 outgoing and accepting the risk of treating another person as a human being. And sometimes we get hurt in the process. Perhaps you have gone out of your way to be kind to another person and have been rebuffed or misunderstood, or not treated kindly in return. You’ve been hurt and are afraid to try it again.

However, Christian kindness is not something that is dependent on how the other person treats us or thinks of us. We are to be kind and forgiving because God treats us that way. And if we’re open and honest with our kindness, we can sometimes be surprised.

There was a young teacher without much experience who was put in charge of a class of difficult children. One young man 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 doing his best to make her life miserable.

For a moment, he looked sullenly at her and then 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 young man than anything else. Human kindness means giving ourselves, admitting our fears, and accepting ourselves and others as they are.

There are times, of course, when we don't feel like being kind to anyone. Maybe we're tired, or our own problems are weighing us down, or someone has been rude to us, or we think we're too busy to bother with the little acts of kindness.

In these moments, and they come to all of us, we find we have to work at being kind. And I believe we need to work at it. After all, true kindness toward others does not come from our feelings or emotions of the moment anyway. Certainly, our feelings and emotions affect us, but true kindness comes from the center of ourselves — it is there because deep down we see all people as human beings, as our brothers and sisters, each having worth and dignity because God created them as God created us.

A Chicago newspaper assigned one of its women reporters 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 people 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 with her, 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 helping her. The reporter found what she was looking for — a kind person. She also discovered that the man who had been with her had a daughter who was having a birthday party that day, and he was late for the party.

Nothing dramatic, no life-or-death situation, only simple human kindness. It was a part of his everyday nature.

The gospels in the New Testament portray Jesus as a kind individual. He took time to play with children, to be helpful with the outcasts and the lonely. In one of his most telling parables, he described his true followers as being those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison. He said, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

We may not know, at times, the astounding results of what kindness can do.

One day a first-grade teacher had her class members each draw a picture of something for which they were thankful. She suspected that many of the students would draw pictures of tables loaded with food and other tangible items like bicycles and dolls.

What surprised her was the picture Douglas had drawn. She looked upon Douglas as her true child of misery, so scrubby and forlorn, and so likely 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 police

officer, 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 decided to only draw one of them."

The teacher had almost forgotten Douglas in her pleasure at finding the class so responsive. When she had the other children at work, she bent over the desk and asked Douglas whose hand it was. He 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 much this little act of kindness had gone so far and meant so much.

Do you want to lessen life's difficulties for others and for yourself? Here's one simple action each one of us can take: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." Amen.