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Sermon Title: In Defense of Niceness
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-6
Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

It was years ago now. We were in the midst of some big family discussion-slash-argument, about the ethics of something-or-other. Some major moral quandary along the lines of whether it's okay to re-gift or what to do when the guy next to you in the theater answers his cell phone. I can't remember the question. All I remember is that in the midst of it, one of my relatives said, "Let's ask Alida. She'll know. After all, she's the *authority on niceness*."

"I'm *what*?" I said.

"You're a minister", they said, "so, what else does that mean except you're the authority on niceness?!"

I have to tell you – I had a very bad reaction to this. Not really a *nice* reaction. All my years of studying Greek and Hebrew, I thought, all those seminars on John Calvin and Martin Luther, all the inspirational professors who urged us to use our pulpits to change the world, be a voice for justice, speak truth to the people, and instead – this – this? What I had achieved was that I was now considered the authority on niceness? Emily Post with a seminary degree?

The authority on niceness, indeed. Boy, was I crabby.

But why? Why did being called Reverend Doctor Niceness irritate me so? Because ... who wants to be called 'nice'? You want authentic, challenging, exciting, edgy, bold. Nice?? It just sounds kind of insipid. Vanilla. Blah. The authority on niceness? Ugh.

Even worse, somewhere over the years nice became not just insipid, but even more like phony. Maybe it's all those crime-scene interviews with the unsuspecting neighbors, maybe that's what's done it – you know, where the naïve neighbors of the guy who turned out to be a crazed arsonist look into the camera and say earnestly "But he was always so nice." Not so much, it turns

out. Being pleasant was just his dastardly cover. In fact, there's a book out now entitled "Don't be Nice – Be *Real*". In other words – if you're being nice, you're *not* being real.

No wonder I reacted to being called the authority on niceness. I might as well have been called the Queen of Phony fakers.

But I've been thinking about this lately, I've been thinking about this while watching reality shows where people are really NOT nice to each other, really kind of awful -- and political debates where people are *really* NOT NICE to each other, *really* kind of awful, and I've started thinking, I've started thinking that Christians could do a lot worse than to be called the authorities on niceness.

In fact, I think it's time to reclaim **nic**. If this sermon had a printed title, which mine never do because I'm too much of a procrastinator to get that figured out ahead of time, but if it did, what you'd see in the bulletin this morning would be the words In Defense of Niceness. In defense of niceness. I ran across this quote from one of the great Christian writers of the 20th century, C.S. Lewis, writing long before the word nice lost its umph. He said this: "Niceness is an excellent thing. We must try by every means in our power to produce a world where as many people as possible grow up "nice"; just as we must try to produce a world where all have plenty to eat."

We all need food – and we all need niceness. Said the great C.S.Lewis himself.

If you think about, that's pretty much what we try to teach our kids, from very early on. What do we say to them? "Play nice," we say, by which we mean, "don't be selfish, don't be mean, share the toys with the other kids in the sandbox." "Be nice to your brother," we say, by which we mean, please don't slug him, and if he wants that other Oreo, for heaven's sake let him have it this time. "That's NOT nice," we say, by which we mean hollering at your mom is not okay, and dangling the hamster by his tail will not promote interspecies harmony.

We use the word all the time with kids; it's like the umbrella term for what it means to be gentle and to be kind, not to hurt one another, to be aware of what someone *else* needs, to live unselfishly and compassionately. Be ye nice, we say. Be ye nice, kiddo.

That's pretty much in a nutshell what the Apostle Paul was saying to his friends in Corinth, his very exasperating friends in the church in Corinth. Be ye nice.

Vickie read you a snippet of his letter, Pauls first letter to the Corinthians. We have Paul's first AND second letter to the Corinthians in our Bible, but given

how much advice that church seemed to need, there were probably 57 MORE letters that he write. This was a bunch of Christians who squabbled pretty much all the time, over who got to be at the head of the line for Communion, over who got to be the head honcho in the church, over whether it was better to be a good preacher or a good cook, and etc etc.

And Paul, in lecturing mode, was saying you gotta be nicer. In this famous 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul said *here's how it works*. When you are together in the church, love is what holds you together. And here's what love looks like: it looks like patience and kindness. It's the *opposite* of being irritable or resentful or rude. In other words, it looks a heck of a lot like niceness. And that, Paul said, is what I'd like to start seeing from you folks. I would like for you to demonstrate to the city of Corinth that you really are the authorities on niceness.

Now Paul was a Christian. (Duh. Obviously). But I was struck, working on this sermon, by how many Christians seem to *disagree* with the idea that Christians should be nice. Sermon after sermon, blog after blog, I kept reading that it was a big problem for Christians to get hung up on being nice. The basic complaint I kept running across was that being nice to other people could very well keep you from being appropriately judgmental of other people. Christians, they were saying, are supposed to be about the business of pointing out people's sins and failings, and how can you do that if you're being nice to them? Christians are losing their moral core, lamented one writer, by falling into the trap of thinking that if you're Christian, you should be nice. But "nice won't get you into heaven and nice won't keep you out of hell."

Wow, *really?*

The other point, made repeatedly, was that "and you know, Jesus Christ himself was not that nice."

Again –*really?* Because I don't know about that. Have you *read* the stories?

I'll give you an example. At our last Confirmation class, I showed the kids some clips from a video called the Gospel of John. That's all it is – just straight up Gospel of John, the stories acted out word for word. So there comes Jesus, straight out of John chapter 9, walking with his disciples. And one of his disciples points out a blind guy sitting by the side of the road, and says to Jesus, check out that man, he's blind, guess he must have sinned somehow, or maybe his parents. Because that's what they figured back then, I explained to the kids – physical challenges meant someone sinned.

What does Jesus do? He says "that's ridiculous, no one sinned here." And he walks over to the man, sits down with him, talks, asks him how he can help –

Heal me, says the blind man, please, and Jesus does. And it's no small thing that Jesus does, cause it's the Sabbath, and he knows he's going to get in trouble for healing on the Sabbath, and he does.

So we watch this clip, that tells the story. And I ask the kids, "What does this tell you about Jesus?" There was a pause while they thought. "Jesus," says one of the kids, "was a really nice guy."

You know what? Yeah, he was. He did exactly what niceness does: connect with another person, understand their need, go outside your own self, lift someone up, grab hold of their burden, offer compassion with gentle kindness. That's what nice does. Niceness, I've heard it said, is the starting point of love, and yes, Jesus was a nice guy.

Last summer, I read an article that intrigued me in the business section of the Times. (Ministers read the Business section too). It was an interview with a man named Andy Lansing, the CEO of a Chicago-based company, and it was one in a series of interviews with CEO where they ask about management style and values and such. And they asked Andy Lansing how he does his hiring. Well, he said, if you sit down with me, no matter how senior you are in the company or the position you're applying for, my first question to you is going to be, are you nice? And, he said, there's usually a long pause, like they're waiting for me to smile or for Ashton Kutcher to jump out and say, "You've been punked." Because who asks that question? But then I say, "No, seriously, are you nice?" And I say, let me tell you why I'm asking that. The reason is that the most important thing to being successful at this company is to be nice. We hire nice people."

It works for Andy Lansing and his company. It works everywhere, actually, and if we could get it going right round this world, well then, we'd pretty much have the kingdom of God finally built.

Speaking of building the kingdom, this past week we honored Martin Luther King, Junior. And I was thinking that what he taught, the movement he led, the legacy he left us, was pretty much niceness on steroids. Gentleness in the face of violence. Kindness in the face of viciousness. Not acquiescence to cruelty and injustice, but an absolute refusal to be a participant in cruelty, a refusal to participate in hostility. Niceness such as this takes phenomenal courage and deepest faith. It is *not* insipid, it is not vanilla, and it sure as heck isn't phony. So while it would be pretty inadequate to put on the King Memorial in DC the words "he was a nice guy," truth is he was a fiercely courageous, powerfully faithful, Jesus-following nice guy. So ought we all to be.

So where do you start? Here's an easy place to start. Think of the nicest person you know. Okay? Today, try to be a little more like them. Now think of someone you really didn't know, but who did something nice for you unexpectedly.

Tomorrow, do something unexpectedly nice for someone. Now think of Jesus, who could spot someone hurting from a mile away and find a way to be the nice guy for them. This week – keep an eye out for someone hurting and be their nice guy. That’s all it takes to start.

Here’s an example. Every Monday in the Times, there’s a column I love called the Metropolitan Diary. It’s just little snippets that readers send in, stories about life in the city, sometimes little poems even. The Monday before Christmas, it included this little story:

“I was on the F train riding uptown. At West Fourth Street, a young man boarded with a boombox. He explained, loudly and enthusiastically, “I’m trying to stay out of trouble tonight, so I’m offering you a dance, like we do it in the Bronx.” Only a few of us looked up. Then he plugged his iPhone into the boombox and proceeded to dance his heart out. This included a few back flips, trapeze moves with the handrails, and body spins on the ground with just one hand. By this time all eyes were glued on him. A young boy next to me yelled out in sheer delight: “Wow — that’s amazing!” We all shared his sentiment. Many passengers gave generously when he walked by with his donation container afterward. Just then, at the other end of the car, a homeless-looking man boarded with a plea for help. He was disheveled and without any dance routine or music act to offer. All he had was a wish for kindness and an outstretched hat — one that remained empty among this group of recent donors. That was until, just before the doors were to open at the next stop, the dancer went right up to the homeless-looking man, spilled out all of his earnings into the outstretched hat and said, “Merry Christmas, man.”

That’s nice. That’s what Jesus-following nice looks like.

So, am I the authority on niceness, like my family said? Nooo – I am not there yet. But I can think of worse things to be called, and in fact I can’t think of too many better. I’m embracing nice, I’m defending nice, and with you, I’m ready to try walking in the footsteps of the nicest guy I know of, in whose name, Jesus, we say *Amen*.