

Kindness

Micah 6:6-8

March 3, 2019

Just wondering –

how many of you have ever put together furniture from Ikea?

A few of us? A bunch?

If you have, then I expect a few sympathetic groans as I tell this story.

It was Saturday, August 11, 2018. Last Summer.

I know that because it was also the day that David flew home from his two week writer's retreat in Bratislava, about which he's told you many stories.

And what I'd done with those couple weeks that he was gone is what I always do when David's gone:

reorganize everything in the house that needs reorganizing that he wouldn't want me to reorganize.

In this case, it was David's clothes.

Although *this* time I felt pretty sure that he'd be happy with what I was doing.

David had all his clothes in this dresser that I had bought at a tag sale 30 years ago and brought with me into the marriage.

It was not quality furniture when it was made, it was in worse shape when I got it from the tag sale, and as of last August, it was in a state of collapse.

Bottoms had fallen out of the drawers, knobs had long since disappeared.

So the first day I was home alone,

I dumped all of David's clothes onto the floor, dragged the dresser out in bits and pieces, and got rid of it.

Then I went to Ikea, and I bought me a dresser.

Except, it being Ikea, what I actually bought was three boxes of wood.

I hauled the boxes up to the second floor,

and for the next two weeks it kept crossing my mind that I should probably get around to putting the dresser together.

Until finally it was the night before David's return.

"I should really go knock that thing together," I thought.

So I got my power screwdriver, my hammer, headed upstairs.

I opened the Ikea boxes, dumped all that wood on top of the clothes on the floor, and searched for the instructions.

These were the instructions for that dresser.

{unscroll instructions}

51 steps. Yeah.

I worked 'til two a.m. that night, got up early,
kept working,
and I was *still* an hour late picking up my husband at JFK.

Traffic, I said, *it was nuts*.

But of course, the truth was that as David's plane had begun its initial descent, I was just finishing step number 51.

In retrospect, David would probably have preferred a timely ride to a completed dresser, but round about step number 37 I had pretty much lost my grip on reality. I *had* to get through the instructions. Soooooo many instructions.

I've told you this entire story so that I can tell you **this** now:

God doesn't work that way.

God does *not* work that way.

And I'm pretty sure that if Ikea had been around in the time of the prophet Micah, that is the illustration he would have gone with, too.

Because he was trying to make a point to people, Micah was, about how really *really* simple God's instructions are. God's instructions for how we are to build a faithful life, God's instructions for how we are to construct a life that is right and true and beautiful.

The way the scripture goes that Jen read to you is like this:

Someone asks -- what are God's instructions?

What does God want from us?

And then they list out all the complicated instructions that *could* be involved.

Maybe you're supposed to show up at the temple with a special sacrifice?
they say— remember, this was a couple thousand years ago.
Maybe you're supposed to have gallons of precious oil to pour on the altar?
maybe you're supposed to bring a whole farm full of animals to give to God?

Absolutely not, says Micah.

There are not 51 steps to **God's** instructions.

What God wants does not require a 10 foot scroll of explanations.

Here it is, says Micah,

here is what you need to know.

God's instructions are simply this:

Do justice.

Love kindness.

Walk humbly with God.

Micah 6, verse 8.

God's instructions.

Do justice.

Love kindness.

Walk humbly with God.

This is **not** that complicated, people.

God's instructions are incredibly straightforward,
and require no special tools.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.

And it's that middle one that I want to focus on today.

In between the doing of justice, and the walking humbly with God,
both worthy of sermons in their own right,
there's that simple, two word command:

Love kindness.

Love kindness.

Not just *do your best to be kind*,

or when you can manage it, do something kind.

But *love* kindness.

Kindness as something that you wake up in the morning ready to give,
kindness as something that you can't imagine not doing.

Love kindness.

And the kindness that Micah is talking about,
the kindness that God calls us to *love*
isn't just some Hallmarky pleasantness –
it is a way of living into this world with openness and compassion and courage.

David and I have both just finished reading a book
that spoke to our hearts.

It's called *The Power of Kindness*,
written several years back now by an Italian psychologist, Piero Ferrucci.

It's a book that the Dalai Lama says you should read,
not just Alida and David!

And what *The Power of Kindness* says is that kindness, true kindness, is a way of being,
a strong way of being.

To be a person of kindness means nurturing within you
qualities of patience and compassion,
of forgiveness and humility
of generosity and empathy.

To be kind is take the path toward our healing and the healing of the world.

We live in a time of global cooling, Ferrucci says,
and he's not arguing with climate science,
that's not what he means.

We live, he says, in a time when human *relations* are becoming colder,
communications more hurried and impersonal,
the pace of life accelerating.

Kindness, in the midst of all that, he says, might seem lightweight,
but it has the power to transform us,
and to transform our world.

Kindness, he says, is capable of saving humanity –
indeed, it already is.

And all around you, every day, he writes, are opportunities to be kind.

And as one illustration, Ferrucci tells a little story,

and I loved this story,
because it's not a big splashy story about someone who changed the course of history.
It's about the *little* ways that we change the course of history.

It's about the guy who checks the parking meters in a little Italian town outside
Florence.

I want to tell you about Roberto, Ferrucci says.

Roberto is the parking attendant in the town of Fiesole.

You know the routine:

*after you park, you put coins in a machine, print a piece of paper, and leave it on the
dashboard.*

Roberto walks around and checks.

In theory, it's not a likable role.

But Roberto is the most popular guy in town.

He's everybody's friend.

*When he sees me, he tells me about how he went to the top of the bell tower,
and how beautiful it was from there,*

or he lets me know my car's left front tire looks a little low,

or he describes Fiesole as it was when he was a kid –

and he does this with everybody.

If you transgress, he'll give you a friendly warning,

because he knows everybody's car,

and often he's come to my office to remind me it's time to pay.

Because he hates writing a fine.

*And he hardly ever has to, because everyone feels treated well,
and everyone pays.*

There are ways, Ferrucci is saying, for all of us to be a Roberto –
to be kind to those around us wherever it is life plants us.

Kindness, he writes, is always right before our eyes.

The opportunity to put things right or to help someone
presents itself every moment.

Infinite are the ways of being kind, he writes.

Infinite are the ways of being kind.

The kindness that God asks us to **love** doing.

Two weeks ago,
on the eve of Valentine's Day,
I traveled up to Newtown with Carol Passmore to go hear an author speak.
I'd run into Carol downtown a few days earlier,
and she'd invited me to join her.
I'll be honest, I didn't know the author's name,
but I like hearing interesting talks,
and I like Carol, so yeah, why not?

When we got to the auditorium where it was being held,
I was startled to see the place packed, hundreds of people.
And as we waited for the author to come out,
I noticed, at the side of the stage,
a sculpture of sorts – a large wood cut-out of a little girl,
with her hair blowing in the wind.

And what I hadn't realized was that I was at an event held in honor of that little girl,
Avielle Rose Richman,
who was six when she was killed at Sandy Hook.
I was at an event hosted by the Avielle Foundation,
created by Avielle's parents after her death,
born out of tragedy by their determination to create something good.

And their mission, their purpose, is to nurture all that leads us away from violence
and all that leads us toward compassion, healing, wholeness.

The man introducing the speaker that night was Avielle's father,
who spoke with passion about their vision for what can be.
And the speaker that night was Elizabeth Lesser,
author of several books –
one of Oprah's favorite guests, I learned.
She shared openly and personally about her life,
about her own journeys through tragedy toward healing.
About the work of learning forgiveness and growing in compassion.
And she spoke about **kindness**.
To quote her:

*I am talking about a **muscular** kind of kindness,
a spiritual practice of the highest order, a way of **being**ⁱ.*

And I sat there in that packed auditorium,
looking at the image of a little girl gone,
surrounded by people intent on creating a better way –
and *never* has God's call to **kindness** seemed more real,
more essential, more holy.

So that's why David and I have a request for you, for all of us,
on this first weekend in March,
as we enter into the holy season of Lent.

Here's our request:

let's make March a month of kindness.

Let's take this month ahead and commit ourselves to practicing kindness,
commit ourselves to finding some new way every day to offer kindness to another.

You can call it random acts of kindness, sure –

I'd call it holy acts of kindness.

Because the one who calls us to kindness
is the one who created us in love,
for love.

The instructions are simple, the prophet Micah said.

Don't complicate it. Just do it.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly.

Do justice, love kindness.

Love kindness. Amen.

ⁱ Quote taken from Elizabeth Lesser's Facebook post on the day of the speech