

“Before You Know What Kindness Really Is”

May 12, 2019

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny Rankin

I confessed to the deacons this week that by the month of May most ministers are weary

And that I’m no exception.

And then I did something that I’m not very good at doing—I asked for help—and I’m so grateful to Joan Kimball and others who stepped up. Later in the service there will be a chance for you to share a brief story or memory of “kindness.”

Dear Friends

It has been a lovely time in the last weeks as the beauty of May has broken over us like a great burgeoning, blossoming wave—

And also a difficult time for this community and the town of Lincoln with the death of two young men, still in high school, David Andrysiak and Nathan Soukoup.

That coupled with a string of memorial services—it takes a toll—

I am mindful of how grateful I am for your presence and participation here and in the wider community,

For the gifts of friendship, love and healing that you bring.

Many of you were present at Middlesex Chapel last Sunday afternoon to celebrate David’s life; it meant a lot to look out and see all your faces there.

Something I’m coming to learn about you, this community:

You show up for each other. There is no underestimating the power of that.

I thank you for your continued presence here on Sunday and participation throughout the week in classes, meditation, serving on committees.

Yes, this community is in “transition” but its core basic ministries do not come to a stop.

Caring for one another and reaching out to the wider world to make a difference—all of that goes on.

You keep it going.

You call one another, offer a listening ear or a helping hand. You sing in the choir or play bells, bringing beauty and joy to us on Sunday morning. You offer a cup of coffee to someone new in coffee hour; help with fundraising; teach our children. You carefully vet grant applications for outreach; interview student minister candidates; plant, clean and weed the grounds.

Just a fraction of the many and disparate things you all do on behalf of this place, to keep it not just going, but going strong.

When Jesus was asked the cornerstone teaching of his Jewish tradition, he answered

“Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.”

The central commandment of the Judao-Christian tradition.

Next fall you will be gathering in small groups to consider that: “Who are we now and who is God calling us to become? Who is our neighbor?”

But meanwhile, the ministry goes on, you go on, showing up for each other and for the wider world. With time, talents, treasure.

Trying to somehow embody that love that is God, right here, right now.

So, thank you.

This is a time of healing and revitalization for a community that has been through a lot and it will take all of our hands and hearts and minds—

Thinking and loving and working together—

To help that new vitality come to birth.

This is a time for direct speaking, truth telling, bridge building, reaching out from your own corner of church life—reaching out across the aisle, if you will, to someone who may have a different perspective.

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I’m going to tell you the “back story” of the poem we heard earlier today by Naomi Shihab Nye on kindness, but first, I have to tell you that 646 years ago tomorrow

On May 13, 1373, a young uneducated, thirty-something woman

Had a personal religious experience that continues to reverberate down through the ages,
And even to this Mother’s Day.

Julian of Norwich, as she has come to be called, fell sick and took to her bed

She was so sick they believed her to be dying and called the priest to administer last rites

In fact, she did NOT die, but went on to have a series of 15 mystical visions

When she got up from her sick bed, she wrote them down right away

Then, she became an anchoress (something that many women did in the Middle Ages)

Retired from secular society

Lived in a little cell attached to the local church

She studied with a local friar who was her spiritual director

And met every morning with a circle of women to study and pray.

And after 20 years of this, she wrote down a second version of her mystical visions:

Revelations of Divine Love.

The book remains one of the great texts in the Christian mystical tradition.

Perhaps you recognize these words: “All shall be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.”

But what I’d forgotten until this weekend was that Julian was radical enough back then

To speak about the *motherhood* of God!

Yes, to use the ordinary everyday experience of women as mothers to explore the reality of the divine love she felt—

To imagine God in feminine terms and using feminine language—as a mother.

Quite simply, she spoke of God not as Father

But as Mother

And that’s worth noting on this Mother’s Day.

So now, to the backstory of the poem “Kindness.”

I have used this poem in worship for many years, preached on it, but never knew how it came to be written till I heard the poet speak on a podcast a few weeks ago.

“Amongst all my poems, this was a poem that was given to me. I was simply the secretary,” said Naomi Shihab Nye. She went on to explain:

“My husband and I were on our honeymoon

Had just gotten married 1 week before

We were married here in Texas

We had this plan to travel in South America for 3 months

And at the end of our first week

We were robbed of everything.

And someone who was on the bus with us

Was killed—he’s the Indian in the poem

It was quite a shakeup of the experience—

What are we going to do now?

We didn’t have passports

We didn’t have money

We didn’t have anything

And a man came up to us on the street and was simply kind

And just looked at us

And I guess could see the disarray in our faces
And just asked us in Spanish you know
“What happened to you?”
We tried to tell him
And he listened to us
And he looked so sad
And he said, “I’m very sorry, I’m very very sorry that happened” in Spanish
And he went on
And then, we went to this little plaza and I sat down
And all I had was the notebook in my back pocket
And pencil
And my husband was going to hitchhike off to Kali
A larger city to see about getting travelers’ checks reinstated
Remember those archaic things
Traveler’s checks?
I haven’t seen one in years
And as I sat there, alone
In a bit of a panic
Night coming on
Trying to figure out what I was going to do next
The voice came across the plaza
And spoke this poem to me.
Spoke it.
And I wrote it down.
I was just the scribe.”¹
And then Naomi Shihab Nye went on to read the whole poem out loud on the podcast and I heard it in a whole new way:

“Before you know what kindness really is
You must lose things
Feel the future dissolve in a moment
Like salt in a weakened broth

¹ Interview by Krista Tippett of Naomi Shihab Nye on “Becoming Wise” podcast.

What you held in your hand
What you counted and carefully saved
All this must go
So you know how desolate the landscape can be
Between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
Thinking the bus will never stop
The passengers eating maize and chicken
Will stare out the window forever
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
You must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
Lies dead by the side of the road
You must see how this could be you
How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans
And the simple breath that kept him alive

Before you know kindness
As the deepest thing inside
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing
You must wake up with sorrow
You must speak to it
Till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows
And you see the size of the cloth

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore
Only kindness that ties your shoes
And sends you out into the day to gaze at bread
Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world
To say "it is I you have been looking for" and then goes with you everywhere
Like a shadow
Or a friend.