

Start Here

by Ellen Williams Hensle, 2/2/25

Throughout January, Jeff Podraza has been making sure I get out of the office to see how our congregation's volunteer hours, benevolence funds and in-kind donations benefit our partner organizations and the neighbors they serve. On Thursday, we went down the avenue to First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, which houses the Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry, to meet with director Eileen Jones. For those of you who aren't familiar, the Crisis Ministry was formed by a coalition of churches, including ours, to provide food, emergency financial assistance, and social services to the Northwest Philadelphia community. As we walked around with Eileen, stories poured out of her: stories about the difficulties faced by people who walk through their doors; stories about the dedication of their volunteers, some of whom have been helping out every week for years; stories about what she has personally learned from working with their clients.

Some stories were playing out before our eyes as we walked the building. A young woman in a hijab asked to talk with Eileen – she had just been through the line to get food and personal hygiene products from the food cupboard, which we support with our First Sunday donations. The young woman wanted to tell Eileen that when she's able, she wants to give back to the ministry. "See," said Eileen, "we welcome all kinds of people. And we always try to err on the side of grace. If you live outside of the zip codes we serve, we'll still try to help if we can. And we help a lot of people who fall outside the guidelines for other kinds of assistance but are still struggling to make ends meet."

She mentioned a meeting she was having later in the day, with a senior who is trying to get her electricity turned back on after more than a month with no power. "It's taking a lot of time," explained Eileen. "She pays on her bill every month but she needs more money to cover her past-due bill than we can give her with one of our grants. I'm calling around to see who else can help. She really needs her power back on. She doesn't have heat."

Back in the office, I told Eileen that her stories and her philosophy of helping reminded me of today's Scripture reading: "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It is not irritable or resentful." Eileen demurred. "I make a lot of mistakes," she told me. "If the Lord loves me through all of that, how can I not share that love with other people?"

"If the Lord loves me, how can I not love other people?" is not a bad definition for the love described in this passage from 1 Corinthians. The word translated here as "love" is *agape* in the original Greek. The New Testament uses a few different Greek words for love, capturing different facets of this complex quality of relating to one another. There's *storge*, which connotes a natural, instinctual affection, such as love for a spouse or a child. There's *phileo*, the root of our beloved Philadelphia, denoting affinity, fondness and mutual friendship – brotherly love, as it were.

And then there's *agape*. *Agape* is the term used most frequently in the New Testament to describe God's love for human beings, but it can also describe the love of human beings for one another. *Agape* longs for the wellbeing of the one being loved. It flows from the nature of the one doing the loving, rather than the character or behavior of the one being loved. And thus *agape* does not depend on the response of the loved one – it can continue even in the face of rejection.

This is how God loves us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God loves us so much that God was willing to give Godself for us in the form of a human being: one who would walk beside us, share our burdens and sorrows, heal our brokenness, and teach us how to love our neighbors as God intends for us to do. The incarnational love of God for us is a love so strong that is willing to risk rejection, even to the point of death on a cross.

If we have received such great love in the face of all our fallen humanity, how can we not share it with others? This question is also at the heart of what the Apostle Paul is trying to share with the Corinthians in this 13th chapter of his first letter to them. It seems the Corinthian church is facing a fair amount of conflict. Through God's work in their midst, they have received different spiritual gifts, ranging from wisdom and faith to prophecy and healing, to speaking in tongues and interpreting messages shared in tongues. All these gifts are good, Paul affirms in earlier chapters. The problem is that the Corinthians have ranked them and the people who have received them, with speaking in tongues at the top, causing all kinds of infighting and wrangling and stratification. All gifts are needed for the good of the body of Christ, reminds Paul.

And without Christ-like love behind them, they are good for nothing. One who speaks in tongues but does not love is just making noise, Paul says. One who understands deeply and insightfully but does not love, doesn't actually know all that much. One who makes a show of giving sacrificially but does not love adds nothing of value to their life or to the world.

And just to make sure the Corinthians are all on the same page about love, Paul gives some parameters. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. This *agape* is how God loves us, and this *agape* is how we are called to love one another in response to God's love for us.

Earlier this week I was putting something away on my bookshelf when I noticed a spine that read *In Defense of Kindness*.^{*} This book was in my office when I got here, left behind by some previous pastor or congregant. Wondering where it came from and what was in it, I cracked it open. Presbyterian pastor and author Bruce Reyes-Chow begins by describing a night at the movies with his family. It was 2018, and they had gone to see the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, about the life and work of another Presbyterian pastor and everyone's favorite television neighbor, Fred Rogers.

Sitting in the theater, hearing the story of Mr. Rogers, quote "struggling to convince the world and communicate to children that love, compassion and kindness are powerful tools for healing, peace, and justice," Reverend Reyes-Chow had a realization about his own commitment to kindness. He writes, "I became acutely aware [that] in becoming increasingly subsumed by the constant barrage of hate [from politicians, professional commentators, and armchair pundits]... my long-held belief that treating human beings as human beings is a transformative, healing and needed witness in the world was fading fast. Affected by the dumpster fire of our political climate, I was becoming cynical and was no longer claiming – let alone practicing – kindness as my way of being in the world.

"That night in the theater, as Mr. Rogers's story unfolded, I was jarred into the realization that a lack of empathy had taken root in me in ways much deeper and more dangerous than I had recognized. Mr. Rogers's righteous indignation, his love of children, and his deep faith reminded me that to love and to be kind are immensely powerful responses to injustice and pain in the world. They are the right way to be."

Reverend Reyes-Chow does go on to defend kindness – against the argument that it is weak, against the argument that it is not an adequate response to injustice, against the argument that it is passive or futile or superficial or naive or stupid. He clarifies that he does not think of kindness as niceness, nor does he think avoiding conflict is inherently kind. Rather, he defines kindness as an active way of being in the world. "To be kind," he says, "is to accept that each person is a created and complex human being – and to treat them as if you believe this to be true." Treating each person we encounter as a beloved child of God does something inside of us, and has ripple effects in the world.

So I've been thinking a lot about kindness this week – kindness as something we can actively practice. There's so much going on in our nation and our world to make us anxious, unsettled, afraid, angry: plane crashes, impending tariffs, federal budget cuts, ICE raids in churches, the threat of an end to programs that our neighbors rely on to stay warm and healthy and fed. It's easy to feel helpless to do anything about what's happening; to feel like we're drowning in chaos; to want to help but not have any idea where to start.

So perhaps, to Bruce Reyes-Chow's point, what we can do for now is to practice kindness. To practice kindness toward everyone we encounter in an active, responsive way, in a way that honors their humanity and ours; to practice kindness in a way that builds up the community, for strong and caring communities are certainly the wellspring of meaningful collective action.

Hold the door. Make a meal. Text a friend. Smile at strangers. Ask for help. Listen to a child. Watch Mr. Rogers – I can confirm from recent experience that you will feel better about the world after just one episode. Donate to local organizations that provide assistance to those who are struggling. Call out the cruelty you see with as much love as you can muster. Keep your heart open to all the pain, and also to all the joy, that life holds. Remember that you, too, are a beloved child of God.

As Reverend Reyes-Chow writes, "we hope that the more expressions and acts of kindness there are, the more people will experience the world as benevolent. We hope that our acts and expressions of kindness will gradually result in a world that sees kindness not as a commodity to barter, but as a natural and normative way to treat everyone around us."

We may not know what to do about the big stuff happening in our world just yet. But for now, maybe the small stuff is the big stuff. And with God's help, the small stuff can grow into stuff that fills the world with more of the *agape* that God intends for all of us.