

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
June 23 & 24, 2012
Rich Phenow
Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness/Gentleness
Galatians 5:22-25

Let's pray first.

Gracious and Holy God, it is a good thing for us to be blessed and to be reminded of the amazing fruit of Your Spirit that You so desire to be a part of our lives. I pray now that Your words would be on my lips and in my heart, that You would speak through me. Thank You for being such an awesome God. In Your Holy Name I pray. Amen.

As I was preparing for this weekend and thinking about this series on the attributes of the followers of Christ, I was reminded from listening to both John's [Pastor John Crosby] sermon and James' [Pastor James Madsen] sermon that the fruit we are talking about, these characteristics and attributes, will not come as a result of our trying harder. It is not about our effort. It is not about us trying harder. James made it very clear that if we stay connected to the vine, the source and the power of the fruit of the Spirit, and if we grow in our faith with study and through living out the Word of God and if we deepen in our understanding of prayer by listening to the quiet voice of God prompting us through the Holy Spirit in ways that go beyond ourselves, when that happens, it is the supernatural power of God at work in us. It is about the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our natures to be more like the character of Christ. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit is about us taking on the very character of Christ, and what you are going to hear us say over and over again is that these aspects are going to be born in our lives only if we draw closer to Jesus Christ. These character qualities of Christ will only be reproduced in us if we spend time with Him. If we experience His joy and peace and gentleness and kindness ourselves, if we open our own hands and our own hearts and our own lives to the work of the Spirit, we will be reminded of Paul's words, that we are chosen, that we are holy, and that we are dearly loved. Did you know that? Do you know that you are chosen? Did you know that you are holy? Did you know that you are dearly loved, that God is madly in love with you?

I've been thinking a lot about how come our young college students no longer attend church here frequently and how come post-college students and young single adults and young dating adults and young couples, and newly marrieds, how come these people aren't coming to church, how come they are not engaged in church? I wonder if it has a lot to do with the fact that the church isn't relevant to everyday life. I wonder if it is because the church isn't really making a difference in the world and in schools and in homes and in neighborhoods. I wonder if that would entirely change if the many perceptions of what the church is and what the church does and who Jesus is and what Jesus does would change.

Companies today are spending a lot of time thinking about their image, how they are perceived. They are thinking about their products and how they want people to perceive them in a certain way. This process is called branding or messaging. Is the message consistent about this product and are people able to take away a line or a tagline that they will remember about this product? Companies, along with churches and communication departments in churches, are asking questions like, “What will we be known for? What will set us apart to distinguish us? How might we sum up our identity in just a few words, so that people will remember who we are and what we stand for?” Let me give you a little illustration of that. What am I talking about? You respond. *It’s the real thing.* “Coke.” Good. We remember that tagline. How about this one? *Have it your way.* “Burger King.” How about this one? *Just do it.* “Nike.” You see, that stuff works, that messaging stuff, that idea of a tagline, the brand. But branding goes beyond just the tagline. It is about a whole personality. It is about a smell. It is about a sight. It is about a color scheme. It is about a feel. It is about ambiance. It is about a kinetic movement into your heart.

Take for example, Starbuck’s. It’s clean. It’s very warm. There are those big, comfy chairs. There are those throw rugs and those lamps positioned on those cute little tables. There is good music being played that is not too loud. There are coffee beans being ground and the smell, the aroma, of coffee everywhere. There are cookies and all kinds of tempting treats there. They even ask you your name so they can personalize your order. Now I don’t know about you, but when I go into Starbuck’s, man, I feel cared for. I feel like I am at home, and I should just stay a while. I should open my laptop and make calls and do business there because it is warm and inviting. It is engaging. It just makes me feel cared for and at home.

I’d like us to think about that a little bit. I wonder how we as the church and how we as Christians are branded in the eyes of our culture. What does the average person think about the church? What do they think are the taglines here? Something like, “We’re right and you’re wrong”? Or, “We can fix your behavior in the church”? Or, “We’ve got normalcy so come and join our little, normal subculture”? Or, “Give us your money for something that may seem irrelevant to your life”? I think, for the most part, the church has been branded by our culture as primarily outside of the mainstream of life. The church is seen as irrelevant.

I will personalize this. What is CPC’s branding? What is our tagline? Hopefully you know this, that we are inspiring all generations to—what? “Follow Jesus, love others, and live missionally.” Let’s try that again, “Inspiring all generations to follow Jesus, love others, and live missionally.” That is our tagline. And what is *our* branding about? What is our personality? We are welcoming. We have folks at the front doors. We had folks helping people off of their bus as they came this morning. We are a warm and inviting place. We are a place that loves stories. We’ve got this *CPC Life* that is all about your stories. We love your stories. We want to hear your story. We want to invite you to feel welcome to tell us your story about how the Spirit is at work in your life.

Let me keep going with this. I’ll ask another question. How about Jesus and His followers? What was their brand and how did people identify them? Especially people that were poor or outside the religious establishment, people that were marginalized, or people that were simply curious, what did they think? Well, probably not one of them would have answered with any of the lines I just mentioned from the current culture. That is because Jesus embodied the exact opposite of those descriptions of the church, of what is meant by being a follower of Jesus. In fact, He was the one who was always criticizing the religious leaders of His day. He criticized them for laying heavy burdens on people’s hearts, for having all the right laws but the wrong motivation, for

being legalistic and out of touch with people, for being unaware of their needs or their concerns. That is why over and over Jesus told the Pharisees, “It is about your heart. It is about compassion. It is about kindness and gentleness.”

Jesus was always in the trenches for people. Jesus was for people first, before the laws, before religious rules, before religion. In fact, He broke the strict religious rules of His day to heal on the Sabbath, to talk to a Samaritan woman, to save a prostitute from being stoned. He did everything that the religious people, who really were their own little subculture, thought was inappropriate. At first they raised their eyebrows, then they got mad, and eventually they killed Him. But I think if you asked the leper or the Samaritan woman or the prostitute or if you asked the blind man to come up with a single word that would brand Jesus, the word might well have been love, gentleness, kindness, compassion. In fact, the tagline might have been, compassion at all costs, no holds barred. And, “How about,” Jesus might say, “we make our brand, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love Jewish people, and love Greek people”? And, “How about if what our brand movement is all about is our acts of compassion? Acts of compassion and kindness to lepers, centurions and prostitutes and Samaritans and the blind and the lame and the IRS agents and the terrorists and the gays and the bisexuals and the lesbians and the transgenders”? Compassion at all costs, no holds barred. That would be the tagline.

Well, Jesus illustrates that well in our text for this morning. I want you to look with me at Luke 10:25-37. In your pew bibles, it is found on page 1,546. We invite you as we always do to take out a pencil and write in the margins and engage in the text. Underline words that mean something to you but interact with the text and follow it. Hear the Word of God.

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

I hope it is crystal clear for you that when this young lawyer tried to trap Jesus, to test Jesus, about what he must do to inherit eternal life, to get into paradise, he wanted to know what *he* must do. But, you see, you and I receive our inheritance, we receive the promise of eternal life, not from what we do but from what has been done for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus explains in verse 27 what is essential and what is most important, and that is to love the Lord your God with your heart and soul and strength and mind and to love your neighbor and to love yourself. Loving our neighbor is really the nature of God. God comes to us in our neighbors. Jesus is making it clear that we have to love God with everything we have, we have to love others with everything we have, and we have to love ourselves.

Then we have this parable, this story with a pointed meaning, about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho through the Judean desert that is frequented by rebels—a refugee area. It is a long, winding road notorious for robberies and beatings. Travelers from these two religious sects, a priest and a Levite, see a man who has been attacked, and they pass by. I don’t know about you, but I wonder why. Then I look at some of the religious rituals and rites of the day, and I realize that if they stopped, they would become unclean from helping this wounded and bloodied man, so whether he is dead or alive, they walk right by. They avoid him. Then the Samaritan comes along, one who is despised and has been hated by Jews for hundreds of years. This is still tragically reflected in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine. The Samaritan stops and immediately, with gentle and tender compassion, he gets up close. He gets right into the wounded area and he puts oil and wine and bandages on the man. He lifts him up on his mount, and he takes him to an inn and stays with him for a night and the better part of another day. He pulls out of his wallet two denarii, which is about 10 days wages for labor, and he tells the innkeeper that on his way back, he’ll make things right. Concrete, effective action. He arrives, shows up, is moved in a posture of gentleness to get right in there, and he makes a difference. That is what the fruit of gentleness and the fruit of kindness looks like before our eyes in the story. Jesus holds up this man as a model and an example.

Let me ask another question. What is the hardest substance on earth? Anybody know? Good. Very good. A diamond. The diamond is the hardest substance. But let me suggest something that is stronger than a diamond—people. I’ve come to discover that people are stronger than diamonds. Every Sunday morning when I see Betsy Winger with MS in her wheelchair, I say, Betsy is stronger than a diamond. You see, I’m convinced that people, human beings like you and me, are some of the strongest substances in the world because over and over again, I’ve observed people demonstrating amazing strength.

Just for a moment, let me go to the other end. What would you imagine is the most fragile substance in the world? People! People are the most fragile substance in the world. My grandfather was a Methodist preacher. He was quite a man. See this. (*Pottery communion chalice shown.*) This is a fragile treasure from a collection of his that was passed on to me. A fragile treasure, a family heirloom, something that has great meaning. I love the fact that my grandfather—(*Chalice falls and breaks.*)—oh, my gosh! I can’t believe that just happened. Well, the part about my grandfather is true. The chalice was 99 cents. Fragile and precious are we. Broken people. The dichotomy of being the strongest and the most fragile. Remember that nursery rhyme?

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again!

We are all a lot like Humpty Dumpty. We are fragile, and we fall. We are broken people. Sometimes we fall, and sometimes we get pushed. But what happens is, we get bruised in life. We are fragile people. We are broken in lots of ways. You did really well with the Humpty Dumpty thing, but do you remember this one?

Sticks and stones may break my bones
But words will never hurt me

I used to believe that was true, but it's not true. Words hurt. In fact, words hurt a lot. Words inflict intense pain and lasting damage, much more than sticks and stones. Words, reckless words, pierce our souls and wound us deeply. And you know how it happens? Somewhere along the way in a relationship, words are spoken and reckless actions taken, and we end up hurt and bruised and broken because deep down, we're fragile. We are fragile treasures. Gentleness and kindness describe the way that we are to live with one another, how to handle and care for fragile people. It is a posture, an approach. We are all fragile people. But you've got to remember that fragile people aren't about them. It is about us, the condition of our soul and spirit and work. It is seeing other people in their fragility as well our own.

People often say to me that my wife, Jody, has the most gentle spirit. Now that is really true. She is genuine, and she can disarm you with her gentleness, but I need to tell you, by no means is she a pushover. Her first approach is with a bit of gentleness, and her ability to handle a fragile person like me is amazing. You see, it is her gentle spirit that sees my brokenness in spite of me and still loves me. In order to practice skills, we need to first see ourselves and see the world around us the way God sees us. God sees us as fragile. He sees us as strong, as chosen, and as holy and dearly loved. We need to see each other like that, and realize that we are all fragile treasures, all of us. Gentleness, in a sense, is taking the part of us that enables us to be the strongest substance in the world and use that to care for the most fragile things in the world, to care for people.

Now the attribute or the gift of kindness is a lot easier to understand. It is reaching out to people. That is what happens when the fruit of kindness is born in us. We become like the Samaritan and enter into the pain and the hard areas of people's lives and get our hands dirty, but real kindness requires action. Kindness is a way of life that works for the good of others. Kindness is bringing out the best in someone. It is seeing beneath the labels. It is seeing everyone the way Christ sees us. It is not seeing them as disabled or as stupid or inconvenient or untouchable. It is not seeing them as worthless or handicapped or unlovable or mentally ill. It is seeing them as a treasure of God. Kindness is seeing through those labels and recognizing incredible value, that each of us is loved by God. Kindness is love in action. It is everything that the Samaritan did and stood for. It was his brand.

I got a great email this week. The email from Annie said, "I assume you are aware of the Christian radio station that talks about paying for someone else at a drive-through. Well, I took my niece, Maddie, to McDonald's yesterday, and we decided to pay for the person behind us.

Maddie watched the person drive up to the pay window, shake her head, and then start laughing uncontrollably. It was so much fun. It was so silly. Let me tell you about Maddie. Maddie is in junior high school. Her family lives in St. Cloud. Annie and George brought Maddie to live with them because Maddie wasn't getting along with her parents. She has a number of learning disabilities. This whole year, Annie and George tutored Maddie every night, and every day they reminded her that she was a precious gift. Maddie is back home in St. Cloud this summer, but she can't wait to come and spend her senior year here in Minneapolis because of the kindness that George and Annie expressed to her. A simple, little act, a profound shaping and transforming of Maddie's life. You see, that is how kindness works. When we offer it to someone else, we receive more in return. It makes a difference in our lives.

Let me bring it back to a question. What is your brand? What is your tag line? What will people say about you? Will they say you have a gentle spirit, that you enter into the pain of other people? Do they see as you as kind? Do they see you as somebody who will take that compassion and turn it into action? What is your brand? Is the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in your life because you are close to Jesus and His character is shining through you? I pray that the fruit of gentleness and the fruit of kindness will grow in you and as they grow in you, that they will make a difference in you, make a difference in your life and those around you. That is what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit makes a difference. Outrageous, contagious kindness and gentleness, peace and joy, self-control, goodness, and faith. They bear much fruit.

Holy and gracious God, we are reminded this morning that we are fragile, broken people, and that we need reminders of Your love for us. We need to be reminded that we are chosen, that we are holy, and that we are Your children and dearly loved. I thank You that You call us to be branded with Your Holy Spirit so that we will take on Your character and love the way You love. Thank You for this holy meal and for engaging with us here in an ultimate expression of Your gentleness and Your kindness. In Your Holy Name, I pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.