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The Fruit of Kindness-The Spirit of Care
Look! A Talking Donkey!
Numbers 22:20-35; Micah 6:6-8

We are now at the Fruit of Kindness in our journey through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many of you have been the recipients of both small and great acts of kindness, and many of you have given and done great and small acts of kindness as well. From words said at the right time to giving of help, energy and time, kindness is perhaps the most visible of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Kindness makes itself most known in the *doing* of kindness. When doing kindness, what we say matters. Proverbs says, *“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (16:24)*. Kindness depends heavily on feelings. When words spoken feel good, we know kindness is being spoken. If something is expressed as kindness, as in the phrase, *“I mean this out of kindness...”* and it does not feel kind, it probably is not an expression of kindness. Almost anything said under the phrase, *“Love the sinner, hate the sin”* will most assuredly be an expression of deep unkindness toward another person. Kindness in word and deed requires forethought and a particular view of creation and humanity.

When doing kindness, what we do matters as much as what we say. Whether large or small, the more we act out of kindness and commit acts of kindness, the more people will feel compelled to do those acts themselves. A radical act of kindness happened to a friend of ours many years ago. Janine was a young woman who had various issues. Trouble seemed to follow her. She had a broken family and had trouble getting her feet under her. After leaving home, she was trying to make her way in the Twin Cities, yet little was working. One day, she was in a coffee shop. She sat down at a table next to a woman. They struck up a conversation. The woman asked very pointed questions about Janine's life. They talked for almost 2 hours. Janine talked about wanting to go to school and maybe living on the West Coast. She cried and the woman let her cry. Janine told her story and the woman listened. Then, at the end of the conversation, the woman took out her check book. Janine thought nothing of it. Maybe she was doing her bills for the week. Maybe she was paying for her coffee. The woman folded the check and gave it to Janine and said, *“You cannot return this to me. Nor can you tear it up. Someone did this for me once, in a place a little like this, when I was about your age, and it was the one thing that changed my life. The only requirement is that, when you are able, you will do the same thing for someone else.”* The check was for \$5000. Within a month, Janine was on a bus to the West Coast and within three months she was enrolled in school out there. Through this radical act of kindness, Janine's life was changed forever.

Acts of kindness don't need to be huge, though, to be meaningful. One of the things my lovely wife does is to pay ahead when she buys coffee. Kate often buys two cups of coffee, but she tells the barista at the coffee shop, *“The second cup of coffee is for someone who is having a bad day. You will know who it is when they come in.”*

Acts and words of kindness are not dependent on how we are feeling. You may be having a horrible day, but the words or acts of kindness you perform for another person will, without fail, turn your day into a better one.

Micah 6:8 tells us that God asks us to do only three things: *love justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God*. Loving kindness begins to define who we are. What's more, kindness defines the quality of our justice and kindness is the outcome of our humility. We can tell how far the gift of the Holy Spirit has penetrated into the soul by the way we treat others, human and non-human alike. The Holy Spirit, by way of the fruit of kindness, opens our eyes to the presence of God and God's messengers.

And so we have the story of Balaam and Balaam's donkey. It is used as a negative example of what it means to journey through life in ignorance of the presence of God. In Balaam's unjust willingness to sell out his prophetic abilities to the highest bidder and his lack of humility in relation to his gift of prophecy, he manifests his unkindness and cruelty in his treatment of his donkey, who has been with him his entire life.

Some of you may be asking, "Why is Balaam not surprised at a talking donkey?" Shouldn't Balaam, in response to the rebuke his donkey gives him, say, "*Look! A talking donkey!*" Regardless of the questions we might ask, the story is intended to show us, among many things, what the fruit of kindness leads to. Kindness, the Spirit of care, leads to seeing the presence of God along our journey of faith. To read more deeply, we could say it is the kindness and sensitive care the donkey provides Balaam which allows her to see the angel in the road. We see something of the donkey's kind and caring nature here. Contrarily, Balaam shows his true nature to God and his donkey. Balaam's cruelty is allowed free expression because he is determined to go in the direction he wants to go.

We can tell quite a bit about ourselves and what we need to change about ourselves by how we treat the creatures and the creation which surrounds us. Pets and the beasts of burden who work for us have developed an exquisite sensitivity to human beings. Our treatment of God's creatures is most often more a reflection of us individually and collectively than it is a reflection of the behavior of the creature herself.

Balaam mercilessly beats his poor beast for trying to protect him. Balaam has no idea what his donkey sees and he does nothing to try to find out why his donkey, whom he has had his entire life, is turning away, pressing his foot against a wall and laying down beneath him. Instead, we see Balaam for who he is, at least at this moment in his life – an abusive, cruel man who cares nothing for his immediate situation, only the outcome of, in this case, fame, fortune and honor. (Tell people to read chapters 22-24).

Our family has had several dogs. (I know nothing of the behavior of cats and do not intend to learn about them in any future, but I do know about dogs). We have had the honor of being companions to a couple of crazy beasts. Bart, the lundehund (a puffin hunting dog from Norway), was the craziest dog we have ever had the pleasure of knowing. He had been treated very poorly when a puppy and we rescued him through the pound. Cutest most gentle dog in the world at the pound. The moment we got him home, he went wild. He ate everything. He could open doors to get to the garbage. We would leave the house and spy on him and would see him run huge circles through the house. He was a loomer. In the middle of the night, he would stare at you until you woke up. For almost 13 years, he tried our patience. He was a food-stealing, growling, ornery cur who was loyal and protective of those he loved to a fault.

Through Bart, I learned the heart-breaking lesson that my kindness toward those creatures and people who cannot speak for themselves is a fragile and variable thing. No amount of meditation training, exercises in patience or deep breathing could help me sometimes in the face of Bart's wildness. Only later did we find out that Lundehunds are literally one step away from a wolf – barely trainable and almost wild. Martin Luther said of dogs, "*The dog is the most faithful of animals and would be much esteemed were it not so common. Our Lord God has made His greatest gifts the commonest.*" He was, as you can tell, a great dog lover. But Bart taught me kindness is not dependent on the behavior of others, whether creaturely or human. Kindness is something we give over and over again, regardless of how it is received. We do not get paid back for it because kindness and developing a Spirit of care is its own reward. Bart died when he was 14 years old. Losing a companion animal is incredibly difficult. Martin Luther also had this to say in response to someone's question as to whether their dog would be with them in heaven: "*Be thou comforted, little dog, thou too in Resurrection shall have a little golden tail*".

The Spirit of Care permeates the fruit of kindness and it is the care we show others, human and non-human, which finally determines our character in this world. The Holy Spirit gives us opportunities for kindness which are endless and common, not just rare and extraordinary. Our stubbornness and need to claim God's direction as our own blinds us to God's presence, even if God has sent one of his messengers to stand right in the middle of our road.

When Balaam's donkey speaks, she speaks in words that seek gentleness and reflect the kindness she has shown her master. She says, *"Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?"* (Num 22:30). She asks Balaam, "When has it been that your protection and best interest has not also been mine?" Balaam cannot answer, except to agree with his donkey. Balaam's donkey becomes a harsh mirror in which Balaam sees how wrong he has been in his treatment of his companion. And it is at this moment the angel of God shows up. Balaam's eyes are opened to the presence of God. The Holy Spirit, by way of the fruit of kindness, which is also the character of his donkey, opens Balaam's eyes to the presence of God and God's messengers.

The gift of kindness, then, is the ability to see others, human and non-human, with the care and compassion with which God sees us. The prophet Hosea, who is overcome with heartache over the inability of Israel to show justice, love kindness and walk in humility before God, speaks of God's history with Israel when he says, *"Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them"* (Hos 11:3-4). As with last week, when we spoke of God's patience, here the same is true: the kindness we show others should mirror the kindness God has shown us.

The kindness of our non-human friends and the care they have for us becomes a model for us. Even though Balaam himself is more stubborn and obstinate than a donkey in this story, it is the donkey's kindness and care of her master which drives Balaam toward seeing the presence of God in the angel in the road. Jesus looks out at the thousands of people who have been hounding him for days, and when he looks out on the stubborn, obstinate, needy masses, Jesus sees the possibility of compassion, care and kindness. The disciples see trouble, unending need and just want to get away from it all. They want to send all the people away without food. Jesus, though, the Gospel of Mark tells us, *"looked upon the people with compassion"* (Mk 6:34). Like our talking donkey, Jesus calls the disciples to task for their unkindness and lack of care for the needs of those who do not know what they need or ask for.

God is trying to communicate with us in all sorts of ways. Contrary to our personal belief, the likelihood is pretty high we are, like Balaam, on the wrong path. Our stubborn, willful ways keep us from seeing the messengers of the Holy Spirit who are on our path, calling us toward justice, kindness and humility. It may be that it is only by an act of kindness, or by recognizing our lack of kindness as Balaam does, that we may be able to see where God is leading us. It may be that the road we are being led down by the messengers of God, the Holy Spirit, is nothing more than to love justice, be humble and most of all, be kind to human and non-human alike. Not for their sake, not for your sake, but for God's sake. Amen.