

“Invitation to be kind ...”

Sermon on Matthew 25, 31-46 at Dunn’s Corner

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Good morning, dear Listeners at home!

I am glad to be here again. Some of you may remember me: I was invited to preach here at Dunn’s Corner in the summer of last year – which feels like a little eternity ago, given how COVID has stretched our experience of time. It *feels* to me like we have been living in this pandemic for years! Like so many of you, I wished we could say it was over - but it does not look that way! Quite the opposite!

Some of you may remember that in my professional life I work as a Hospital chaplain in one of the large Harvard teaching hospitals in Boston. Like everywhere in the country, like in Rhode Island and in Massachusetts, the number of patients who are infected with COVID are rising. A few days ago we heard that the staggering number of 250,000 COVID deaths has been reached in our country. Patients in our hospital are nervous that they could catch COVID in addition to the sickness that brought them into the hospital. Family members are worried about their loved ones getting even more sick! Staff are getting tense again about what might happen to them as the numbers of infections rise alarmingly. And it looks like things will be getting worse in the weeks we are facing.

It is a scary situation that we are all in, that we have all been in for the last months: we constantly have had to protect ourselves from this invisible virus. We have to be careful when we go shopping; we have to be cautious when we meet our friends; we need to take precautions when we want to get together with our families, for the sake of our health and the health of our loved ones. A few days ago the CDC, the National Center for Disease Control recommended that people

should not travel for Thanksgiving, but stay at home. Imagine that, Thanksgiving! The family celebration of the year! Many of us are also worried about economic struggles we have been facing and might be facing, some of us more and some less. At this point we do not know which path will lead us out of this awful situation. We have no way of telling how much longer we will need to live with this challenging and dangerous reality.

In these months of living with the pandemic we have had to ask ourselves big questions! This pandemic has utterly changed our lives, our habits, the plans we had for this year, the rhythms we usually live in. Some of us more severely, some of us less, but ALL of us have been powerfully affected by this pandemic. All of us have lost someone or something this year, a person we loved, a neighbor we treasured, a trip we looked forward to. We were not able to go and eat out at our favorite restaurants, hang out with our friends or family. Some have lost their business, some their jobs. The school children have been massively affected by this pandemic; many of the college students are doing their college studies from home and - I am sure all of you know somebody who was infected.

So we had to ask ourselves big questions. How can we live under such circumstances? How do our priorities shift when we are so powerfully challenged? How do we spend the time that opened up from traveling less, socializing less, working at home?

We have a famous biblical text for our Sunday today, that also asks big questions: Questions like: *At the end of the day, what are the consequences of the way we live our lives?* **How are we supposed to treat our fellow human beings?**

Does it matter whether or not we are kind & caring, whether we are cruel and careless, compassionate or indifferent towards our fellow human beings?

This biblical text takes us into a great drama, it takes us to the end of all time and talks about what will happen when everything is said and done; when we have lived our lives, made our decisions and our time on this world is over - what then?

The answers this biblical scene spells out, are simple and powerful: At the end of the day it all comes down to how we have treated our fellow human beings. It comes down to how we treated especially those people who are vulnerable, helpless and who are suffering from the lack of basic human needs. How we have responded to people who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, sick and imprisoned. It comes down to the question whether we have noticed and cared about the pain of the outcasts. It comes down to whether we share the resources we have with those who are hungry & thirsty. It comes down to how we respond to people who are sick, worried, afraid and who suffer from loss.

This text is a powerful invitation to be kind! And to be compassionate with people who are less fortunate than those of us who get to live mostly comfortable lives! It is a very specific invitation we are presented with. It is not just acknowledging pain, exclusion, poverty or loneliness. It is an invitation to actively engage in kindness, to see and recognize such people in our midst and to actively reach out to them with the intention of improving their situation.

Christianity, dear Friends, is the religion of love! Sadly, Christians have not always been loving and do not always present as loving. And, as we all know, terrible crimes have been committed in the name of Christianity! When Jesus was asked what the central guideline for Christian life is, he was very clear and

answered with what is called "The great commandment:" "***Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.***" And "***Love your neighbor as yourself!***" In our text the neighbors are specified: Tend to those neighbors who are poor, hungry, lonely, ill and imprisoned! The message, Jesus's message is clear as a bell. Why then do we not see more of such love?

Dear friends, there are of course many reasons for this. I would like to present one reason that I believe is important: I believe that our ability to be kind, caring and compassionate has to do with our perspective. The basic rule is that we see what we know. We recognize what we are familiar with. We know the pain of losing a loved one when we lose a loved one and when that pain cuts us open from the inside. In other words, we can only develop empathy for people who suffer, who are lonely, who are stigmatized, when we ourselves have experienced what pain feels like.

I am not suggesting that we need to seek out pain in order to recognize pain. I believe that all of our everyday lives inflict painful challenges. We have talked about the challenges COVID has put on all of us. We recognize challenges when we have experienced challenges. And we can develop empathy when we don't want others to continue feeling the pain we know is awful to bear.

I want to share with you a poem from the Arab American Writer *Naomi Shihab Nye*. This poem is called "Kindness" and it speaks eloquently about what needs to happen within us before we are able to treasure kindness:

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
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.

Naomi Shihab Nye

I believe Christianity is about this very tender gravity of kindness, a kindness of people that know sorrow and pain, a kindness of people who have experienced what abandonment and despair feels like and because of that knows how very precious this kindness is. That dear friends is precisely the precious gift we can share with each other and give to each other in the Spirit of the Great Lover that invited us Christians to follow him on his path of unconditional kindness, gentle compassion and a fervent love for each and every one of his brothers and sisters. We are those brothers and sisters and we have always been the brothers and sisters that are invited to pass on this love and deserve to receive this love!

Amen

Related quotes of Mother Teresa:

"I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus." (Mother Teresa)

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's [kindness](#): [kindness](#) in your face, [kindness](#) in your eyes, [kindness](#) in your smile." – **Mother Teresa**